written by
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NOVEL 3
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

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THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

SENA AJISAI
My heart was pounding in my chest as I went through the ticket gate, and then—
"Oh, Rena-chan! Over here."
Like a lone flower in bloom, there stood Ajisai-san.
I couldn't help it. She made me scream.
"Oh my god! You're so cute!"
AMAORI RENAKO
I refused to so much as glance to the side, because I knew that if I did, Ajisai-san's boobs would fill up far too much of my field of vision again.
"The heat feels lovely."
"Y-yeah, for sure."

ODUKA MAI
"Rena-chan, I..."
Ajisai could not tear her eyes away from this girl in her yukata.
"Aha! There you are!"
Everyone was looking up at the fireworks, save for the one girl who smiled at them in radiant delight.

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There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless...

3

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Eku Takeshima

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
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Prologue

THIS WAS TORTURE. I wanted to run away. Man, I just wanted to go home.

I, Amaori Renako, a completely middling example of a first-year high school student, was just sitting in a chair trying to make it through this. I was so completely out of place!

As I looked around me, I watched the various dazzling locals cross in and out of my vision, all big industry-looking folks who were probably preoccupied with talking about the huge role fashion would play in shaping Japan's future. There were a couple of young people sprinkled here and there, but each and every one of them looked so fancy that they could have come from a different dimension. For a modestly dolled-up waif like yours truly, the sheer pressure of it all made me feel like I was about to be squashed flat as a deep sea fish. Come to think of it, a few of my organs might have already started giving out while I wasn't paying attention.

Summer vacation was in full swing, and I was here at a fashion show in trendy Shibuya. However, this was the one time when I hadn't been tricked into attending an event of this caliber.

I'd started to get worried that my summer vacation was going to dissolve into a never-ending cycle of homework, video games, video games, homework, video games, more video games, even more video games, and so on and so forth. I mean, that was my definition of living the high life, but it'd also been my foolish dream to become a more popular, extroverted teenage girl. If I lazed about all summer long, I feared I'd end up retreating into the shell of a recluse, the way I'd been before I'd reinvented my image for high school. And that—let me tell you—was no bueno. I mean, I'd worked my butt off for three months now, wearing down my spirit in the process. If I had to start all over again from level 1 when summer vacation ended, that'd be like getting thrown back into hell just to climb back up again. *Please,* I thought. *Anything but that.*

But the thing is, there simply weren't any convenient excuses to leave my nice, air-conditioned bedroom. That is, until my friend invited

me to this show. I was so grateful that I leaped at the invitation, and that's the story of how I ended up here.

The seats around me were slowly filling up. In an attempt to blend into the background, I took up the pamphlet I'd already read for the umpteenth time and opened it for yet another careful perusal.

This show was for Apparel Brand QR. There, in the pamphlet, was the image of an elegant blonde girl with a corsage woven into her golden locks. She stood in a daring pose, her eyes fixed straight ahead: Oduka Mai.

She and I share a special kind of relationship called being friends with Renafits, the Renafits being that we shared the deepest parts of ourselves with each other. And—

Just then, all the lights went out, and the world plunged into darkness. A spotlight came on, illuminating the stage, and a deep bass sound began to play, one that rumbled through my whole body, drawing the crowd's gazes with an air of apprehension like something incredible was about to begin.

Ripping straight through my ordinary, everyday life in the process, a series of models began to parade one after another down the runway. *Oh my god,* I thought. Their heads were so tiny, their legs so *long*. Every single one of them, from the girls around my age all the way up to women much older, walked so smoothly that it was like they glided across the catwalk.

Granted, this was a fashion show, meaning the clothes they wore were the main attraction, but no matter what I tried, I just couldn't take my eyes off these girls. I mean, what other choice did I have? If I'd happened to catch sight of one or two of them out and about, I would have been like, "Wow, that girl's smoking!" and been a little hotter under the collar for a good moment afterwards. And then to have a whole bunch of them in the same place? I was about to lose my mind.

Mind you, I couldn't begin to tell you if the clothes they had on were any good!

I sighed internally. I could feel my summer vacation becoming more fulfilling by the moment.

However, as the show went on and on, Mai's turn on the catwalk never came. I was just about to start wondering if I'd maybe fallen unconscious at some point and slept through it when a lone girl stepped

onto the stage.

She should have been very familiar to me, but it was like I was seeing her for the first time in my life. Her whole body was wreathed in light and colors as she traipsed forward, staring straight ahead with a gentle look in her eyes. Every one of her footsteps spoke of her illustrious past and the dazzling future awaiting her. I gaped at her, all my anxiety forgotten. Her walk was so graceful, she moved like a mermaid in the ocean. I felt like I was catching a glimpse of a fairy-tale creature through the window of a submarine. She was an ethereal being whose every aspect was designed to captivate humanity, from her gaze to her fingertips to the very tips of her hair. She did me in.

When Mai turned and walked away, I took a deep breath as if I'd only just remembered how to breathe. My heart raced like I'd laid eyes on an otherworldly mystery, and it took several minutes to calm down.

The lights came back on afterwards, signaling that the show was over. Mai was apparently QR's final act. I had no idea how much of an honor this was, exactly, but it had to be something way, way out of my league.

I felt like I'd just finished a video game and watched the final cutscene. For a moment, I stayed slumped in my chair and didn't move. *Hot damn,* I thought to myself. Had I really talked to this unbelievable girl on the first day of school? I mean, I'd known she was popular, but this was next level. Sure, I thought I'd known a thing or two about her, but what had I been thinking? If I'd known beforehand that she was a model, I would never have approached her; instead I would've spent the whole three years of high school watching from afar and nursing an inner anguish. So, given that, maybe it was for the best that I hadn't known.

At any rate, guess it's time to go, I thought. I was just about to stand up when Mai came over.

"Why, hello there," she said. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

Eeep. My heart skipped a beat as the girl who had just minutes before walked down the runway stood before me in the flesh. I was pretty damn close to weeping tears of gratitude and being all like, "I'm your biggest fan! It's *such* an honor to be able to talk with you today! Oh my god, now I can die happy!" but I desperately reeled myself back

in.

“Y-you were so cool up there!” I said instead. “You looked really pretty.”

God, I sounded like a total kid saying that. Curse me and my lack of vocabulary!

But Mai looked relieved regardless. “Really?” she said with a grin. “I’m glad to hear that. I was terribly anxious since I knew you’d be watching me.”

This anxiety she mentioned, I figured, was probably one of the important factors in pulling off a successful performance. My own anxiety, which made my mind go so blank I couldn’t say a word, was a whole different beast.

“Are you sure models can come out into the hall when the show’s barely over?” I asked. I mean, her hair was still in its braid, and she hadn’t taken off any of her gorgeous show makeup yet.

“Absolutely,” she said. “After all, this is QR’s official runway show for the media and consumers.”

“Oh, I get it,” I said, not getting a thing. I would have felt bad asking her for an explanation and wasting her time.

Mai giggled. “That means that part of my job is to mingle with the audience.”

“O-oh, that makes sense!”

I nodded at Mai’s friendly smile. Aww, darn it, my heart was going haywire! It was like when you date some good-for-nothing schmuck who happened to look cool when he went up on stage to play in his band. I had to remind myself that this was the very same girl who’d once agonized over the thought of using my lap as a pillow. But I just couldn’t see that now!

As I silently panicked over her, Mai’s beautiful face drew closer to mine. “What’s wrong, Renako?” she asked. “You’re turning awfully red. Are you falling in love with me all over again?”

“I never even fell in love with you to begin with!” I protested. “So that takes the ‘all over again’ off the table.”

“Oh, really? What a shame. If we were alone, I could have listened to your heartbeat and let it do the talking instead.”

“Urgh,” I groaned. I could never be open with my feelings in front of Mai. I mean, I couldn’t even wrap my head around why she liked me to begin with. Mai had told me we were destined for each other, but I’m pretty sure I’d just won a lotto with a one-in-seven-billion chance. Yet had I said that to Mai, I’m sure she would have just responded with, “Even so, *you* were the one who won,” which would have made me feel like I should just shut up and accept my good luck. That was why I refused to do so.

“W-well, falling in love aside,” I said, conceding to her as much as I could allow, “I did… Um. I did think you looked very cool out there. So I may have just… Um. Started liking you a little more than I did before, I think.”

Mai’s face broke out into a smile. “My goodness,” she said. “You really are a stubborn one.”

“N-no, I’m not! Jeez, Mai. I was trying to be…well, honest, there.”

“I see,” she said in a gentle whisper. “Well, then I’m glad to hear it.”

Th-there’s no need to whisper, I thought. Her voice made me look down in embarrassment. Was this going to cause an issue? Were other people going to look at us and wonder why these girls were flirting? *Nah, it’ll be fine,* I reminded myself. After all, Mai and I were just good friends! Nothing more!

“Since you came all this way to meet with me,” Mai said, “I was hoping we could stop by somewhere on the way home together, but I unfortunately have a few meetings with the press first. It’s been too long since we’ve seen each other, but… Alas.”

“Yeah, that’s a shame,” I said. “Your summer vacation seems awfully booked up, Mai.”

“Yes, it is a bit,” she said. “My apologies. I swore to always bring you happiness during our wedding vows, and yet here I am leaving you lonely.”

Ah, she was so busy that she’d started hallucinating, the poor thing.

“I mean, if you ever want to text me or stuff, go right ahead,” I said. “You could even give me a call once in a while, you feel me?”

She hugged me, and I yelped. *Not in public, Mai!* I thought. I mean,

not that anyone cared about two girls hugging each other. It was just that I was mortified! She smelled so nice!

"Good," she said. "Now I've stocked up on Renako-ness again and have the drive to keep going."

"I-I'm glad to hear that…"

"Incidentally, I bet I'd have even more drive if you let me draw up a prenup with a lawyer as a witness. Would you oblige if we did that?"

"Uh, no?!"

I looked it up later after I got home and found that one in four couples in Europe and the US get prenups before marriage. Call me a true-blue Japanese girl, then.

"Anyway," I started, "I wasn't planning on staying out that late in the first place. Mind you, I wouldn't be down for signing a prenup even if my calendar was free."

"Oh?" she said. "You're going to Ajisai's house tomorrow, aren't you?"

How'd she know? Mai smiled at me, but I could sense something else hidden in that grin. Or, no—was I just being paranoid?

"U-uh, yeah, I am…" I said.

"Okay. You two sure are close. It's a pity I have work tomorrow and can't join you both."

"Y-yeah, it's a real shame…" Internally, I thought, *Wait, you wanted to come?* But I kept that to myself.

"Yes," she said. "A shame. A terrible, terrible shame."

Mai was already on probation for the time she'd tried to get it on with me after becoming jealous of Ajisai-san. Mai could control the weather, the Earth, and everyone on it, so why was she so desperate to have *me*? Or, on the flip side, maybe she got so eager because she *couldn't* have me? Man, I had no clue.

I tensed and gave Mai a wary look. "W-we'll just have to hang out another time, huh?"

"Mm-hmm," she said. "That we will."

She flashed me a brave smile. "I'd best be going too, really. I apologize for adding all those unnecessary comments. Please, don't

mind me. Enjoy your time with Ajisai. She's such a dear friend to me too, so I'm ever so glad you two are close pals."

Urgh, I thought.

I knew just how deep Mai's desire for me ran, so seeing her holding herself back like this was kind of touching. I felt like a mom saying, "Don't worry about me, I'm not even that hungry" with a big smile when my daughter, well aware of our finances, asks for the cheapest kake soba for dinner.

The most I could do was respond to Mai with as much support as possible. "Same here," I said, squeezing her hands. "And thanks for inviting me to this fashion show today. Good luck with work!"

Mai gave me a radiant grin. "I'm always happy to work hard if it gives me a chance to show off my beauty to you," she told me. "Thank you for coming."

Then, with a smile so beautiful I thought I must be dreaming, Mai departed.

Whew, I thought. I'm not sure if it was thanks to her showing me such a cool side of herself, or just because I hadn't seen her for so long, but my heart would not stop racing. It was almost like I was in love with Ma— Okay, fat chance of that happening! *Careful there, me*. I needed to stop tempting fate. It was like standing on one leg on the edge of the roof in a display of courage. One of these days I'd suffer a fall that I wouldn't survive.

Anyway, just then, I realized there was a blonde woman standing next to me, although I didn't know how long she'd been there for. "You and that model sounded like you knew each other *quite* well," the lady said.

Her long hair was bound into two ponytails of different lengths. She didn't seem to be too particular about her clothes, as she wore a plain button-up dress shirt and a tight miniskirt. She seemed as detached and aloof as a scientist who spent all day holed up in a research lab, but she was also a lot shorter than me and looked to be about twenty or so. Still, I was sure she was a celebrity. She just seemed so at home here.

"Uh," I said. "Um." Flustered by being approached by a total stranger, I nodded. "Y-yes, she's my, uh. Classmate."

“Really now?” she asked. “How close are you with each other?”

“‘How close’?” I repeated.

That was an awfully tricky question. Objectively speaking, we were close enough to kiss! But I obviously couldn’t tell this lady that.

“Um…” I began. “Well, I can at least say it’s not a one-sided friendship. We’re close enough that I can confidently say she thinks a lot of me too.”

That was, to my mind, the highest assessment one could give a friend.

“So have you been physical yet?” she asked. “I mean, do you two embrace each other and the like?”

“What?”

Who the hell was this lady?! Had she not heard a thing I said? I tensed once again, ready to book it out of there at any moment.

The lady’s face didn’t so much as twitch as she said, “Her entire aura shifted around June. Once it was a brilliant vermilion, and now it’s more of a muted magenta. Sudden changes transform a model’s qualities, so I want to get to the bottom of this if possible. And speaking of bottom, when you hug, whose arms go on top?”

“N-neither!” I said.

Also, what language was that first part in?

“Well, no matter,” the lady said. She spun one pigtail around her finger and got back to business. She passed me a small paper card.

“Uh?”

“You don’t need to answer,” she said. “I only wanted to know what inspired this transformation. You’re her friend, you said, no? Give me a jingle if any trouble happens. I shoot for taking a fifteen-minute break every day, so if you time it right, I’ll be able to take your call.”

“That’s only a 4 percent chance that I’d get it right!”

She’d passed me a business card. Apparently satisfied now that I’d taken it, she walked away at a brisk clip. What on earth was with that lady? She was like a freaking anime character, what with her bossiness and sheer strength of personality.

Well, those were fashion shows for you. They were places where

people's individuality was the selling factor, so you got people flocking in with all kinds of idiosyncrasies.

As I mulled this over, I checked out the business card. It was so fancy that I couldn't even read it! There was none of the usual commercial this, connections that, business something-something. It was a little *too* designer for a business card. I mean, it wasn't even in Japanese!

After I left the fashion show, I went through every suffering known to man trying to decipher the handwritten Latin letters. *Uh…* *Um…* I thought.

I set off for Shibuya Station, and as I waited on the platform for the train, I stared down at that card. Luckily, I was able to get a seat.

I looked back down at the card. There was a name written in English letters. Once I'd figured out its Japanese translation, I said in a quiet voice, "Renée…Oduka…san…?"

I opened the pamphlet I'd shoved into my bag, now tattered from how often I'd reread it. And there was printed an image of that very same woman: Oduka Renée, the CEO and lead designer of Apparel Brand QR. And that meant…

I'd been talking to Mai's mom!

I almost screamed out loud, right there on the train.

When I got home, I started to call, "Hey, I'm back," when I noticed a pile of shoes that had been tossed into the entranceway, all of them cutesy-wutesy and brand-spanking new. Uh-oh. Judging by how much my social butterfly senses were tingling, my sister must have had friends over!

I tiptoed to my room. I always felt awkward on the many, many occasions she invited all her cute friends over. Well, on the plus side, they had given me the opportunity to train my stealth skills. I was well practiced at moving without a sound (in my own house).

However, in a stroke of terrible timing, my sister's door opened just as I was sneaking past her room.

"Oh, Oneechan," she said.

"Gah!"

Up until now, whenever my sister had run into me when she had friends over, she would immediately tell me to get lost like I was some kind of stray dog. (And that hurt, you know!) Lately, though, she'd started warming up to me. Maybe I'd finally freed myself from the shackles of being a reclusive loser. Maybe I was approaching something worthy of personhood. Okay, stop, there was no reason to beat myself up like that. I was already super social, to the point where my sister looked up to me. When it came to our house, I ruled the roost. I stood out as much as the sun.

My sister, dressed in a very casual outfit, looked me up and down as I stood before her dressed to the nines.

"Huh?" she said. "Did you go somewhere?"

What, she hadn't even noticed that I'd left the house? The nerve of this girl! How dare she take that tone with me, the peerless being I was?

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Just to Shibuya, I guess."

The girls in her room noticed me standing and talking in the doorway. "Oh my god, it's the legendary Oneesan," one said. "Hey there!"

"Wait, for real?" said another. "Oh my god, you're so cute!"

Aaah! I thought. *Extroverts!*

One of the girls wore a sporty bob, and the other was super pale with her hair dyed in every bright color you could think of. Both of them were really pretty. Even though they were younger than me, I froze, nervous. The indignity of facing such a horrid fate in my own house! I'd have been better off messing around the living room until they'd left. *I'm sorry,* I thought. *I'm really nothing like the sun at all. I'm like the shadow of a tiny pebble!*

But now that they'd said hi, I couldn't just ignore them. Alas, the trade-off for not having loading screens in real life was that there was also no autosave that kicked in whenever you walked into a building.

"H-hi," I said. "Thanks for always watching out for my sis."

Working up the remaining dregs of my social skills, I did my very best to smile. I could afford to go all out. This was my home, my territory, the sacred land in which I was strongest. And besides, the girls were all younger than me. If I looked like I had my head on straight enough, they wouldn't be able to see through my mask for a good few

seconds.

Just then, Rainbow Hair trotted over to me and grabbed me by the arm. Hello?

"Hey, Oneesan, c'mere and chat with us!" she demanded.

She looked down on me with a sickly-sweet, friendly smile. *Oh god…* This was the sort of confident grin you got from someone who was not only the cutest girl in the class but who also knew it. Freaky.

She dragged me into the cool, air-conditioned room. My mask had now slipped off my face and was dangling by a thread.

"We were literally just talking about you," Rainbow Hair told me.

"Uh-huh?"

She cozied up to me. Her upper arm felt so, so soft… Oh, the smooth skin of a younger woman!

"Cut it out, Seira," my sister said. "You're bothering her."

"No way," Rainbow Hair insisted. "Right, Oneesan? Hey, Oneesan, I hear you're friends with Oduka Mai, aren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah."

I wasn't doing anything but pressing my two voice buttons ("Yeah" and "Uh-huh") in order to act like I was carrying on a conversation, but now I felt somewhat relieved. She didn't actually care a whit about me. She just wanted to hear about Mai. I mean, who wouldn't, though? Besides, there was no way someone as cute as her would have had any interest in me.

"I knew it!" she cried. She clapped her hands together and leaned in. "Hey, Oneesan, I've been thinking nonstop about how pretty you are from the moment I first saw you! You're so skinny, and you give off, like, such a good vibe."

"Huh? Wait, what?"

Did this girl need glasses? Where the hell did this come from?

"Y'know, we should be friends!" she suggested. "Wanna swap numbers?"

"Hey, uh, Sis…?" I looked to my sister for help, but, much to my surprise, my sister was smirking at me.

"Well, I suppose I can't argue with you there!" she said. "I mean,

my oneechan's Mai's best friend in the whole wide world, after all."

This little punk! Oh, she was my sister all right. I could really feel the familial connection now. In this family, we believed in using others to make ourselves look good! Had she been blabbing about me at her school now?

"Her best friend in the whole wide world?" I said. "Uh, I don't know about that…"

Maybe that was the end goal, sure, but I didn't think we were quite at that point already.

As I frowned, the excitement in the kouhais' sparkling eyes also flagged. *Oh, shoot,* I thought.

"Yup!" I said. "Actually, never mind. We are!"

"See? What'd I tell you?" my sister crowed.

I threw out my chest in pride as she applauded. I wonder if the Amaoris had engaged in this sort of buffoonery for generations.

The kouhais perked right back up.

"Ooh, that's awesome!" cried Rainbow Hair. "Wait, Oneesan-senpai, do you model too?"

"Huh?" I said. "Um. Uh. I wish I could tell you!"

I tried to smile meaningfully, but my sister exploded into laughter.

"My sister? A model? Her, a model?" (More laughter.) "No freaking way! She could never… A *model*!" (Even more laughter.) "Yeah, not happening!" (A disgusting amount of laughter.)

I was literally going to kill this girl. *Go ahead and roll around on the floor in hysterics now,* I thought. *You'll never laugh again by the time I'm done with you.*

Trembling with rage, I yanked the pamphlet out of my bag and brandished it at her. "Yeah, maybe I'm not cut out for modeling. But guess what? Mai invited me to a fashion show today, so there!"

Just then, the girl in the bob haircut who'd been nice and quiet through all of this squealed. Huh?

"Oh my god, is that Queen Rose's fashion show?!" she screamed. "Did you legit go? Oneesan, did you, like, see it live?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah."

“That’s *crazy*. Seira, Haruna, isn’t this the freaking coolest?”

“I’m not big into that stuff, but yeah, that rocks!” said Rainbow Hair.

“Well, that’s my sister for you!” my sister chimed in.

Bob Haircut slapped me on the back as Rainbow Hair beamed and my sister smirked.

“Queen Rose has gained tons of fans the world over as the number one Japanese street fashion brand for the past decade,” Bob Haircut gushed. “They don’t just stop at showing their collections at Tokyo Fashion Week either. They participate in the Big Four fashion weeks all across the globe!”

I nodded along with her as she gushed. It only now occurred to me that that was what QR stood for.

“You’re really into fashion, aren’tcha, Minato?” Rainbow Hair said. “And here you were not being interested in going over to Haruna’s place.”

“I-I’m into fashion,” said Bob Haircut. “Just not Oduka Mai in particular. I mean, she’s the star model of Queen Rose, so it’s not like I particularly dislike her either. I just… Anyway, you only like her because she’s popular, Seira! You’re just jumping on the bandwagon!”

“Huh? No, that’s not why I like her,” Rainbow Hair insisted. “It’s ’cause I want to be a model someday.”

Ah-ha. Judging that their focus had shifted to something else, I scrambled to my feet. “O-okay then,” I said, “I’m going to head back to my room now, so you girls have fun, okay?”

I had just returned home from a fashion show with my best friend, Oduka Mai. I, basically the biggest extrovert known to man and the target of respect for this gang of junior high girls, gave my hair a little *flip, flip* and made for the door.

But just then, Rainbow Hair stopped me in my tracks with her sickly sweet voice. “Huh? Oneesan, you dropped something.”

“Hm?”

It was that little piece of paper I’d stuck in my pamphlet.

“Oh, that’s…” I began. Rainbow Hair, Bob Haircut, and my sister all peered at it. “Just a business card I picked up at the show…”

Rainbow Hair and Bob Haircut screamed at the exact same time. “Oduka Renée?!”

Whereupon I was thrown right back into the deep end.

“You mean Oduka Renée from Queen Rose?! The literally world-famous designer?”

“They did a TV special about her work on Little Witch recently!”

As the girls bombarded me with questions and comments, my stomach began to ache.

Finally, I managed to beat a retreat to my room. Believe me, the amazing ones here were Mai and her mom. Not me.

I scrambled out of the clothes I’d put on to go out and into a set of loungewear. I wanted to take off my makeup too, but I’d do that once my sister’s friends had left.

I sighed and flopped onto my bed. “I’m pooped,” I told myself.

Seriously, I’d gone overboard there. Having the kouhais start to warm up to me and constantly pop over to hang out all summer long was the literal worst. And I didn’t want them to immediately see how much of a mess I was and laugh at me for it, like “Oduka-senpai’s incredible, but you? LOL! You’re nothing more than her flunky! LMAO.” I wouldn’t be able to handle such a fall from grace! Gah, if only they hadn’t seen that pamphlet. I was such a fool for not keeping my head down and seeking a little short-lived gratification instead. Besides, as a former reclusive loser, the only brands I knew about were Uniqlo and GU. I should have been ashamed of myself. The more I used someone else’s status as a means to get ahead, the sharper the knife cut later. Well, I guess that’s just the way the world works.

As I rolled around in bed, agonizing, a text popped up on my phone. I stared at the screen with teary eyes. Who in the world could be messaging this shallow, attention-seeking woman? Was there anyone in this world who would truly care for the likes of me?

See you at 1 at the train station tomorrow? the message read.

Oh, Ajisai-san. This message was from Ajisai-san. Oh, my angel! Even her writing was adorable. It was in high school that I’d met Ajisai-san, kindness taken shape in the form of a beautiful young girl. Whenever I succumbed to self-loathing, Ajisai-san’s text messages saved me.

But was it fair for me, human foolishness incarnate, to take up the time of the quintessentially lovely angel Ajisai-san? And yet, and yet! If I faked being ill and went, “Sorry, I think I caught a cold. It’s looking like I won’t be able to make it tomorrow,” I’d make her worry about me. She’d be like, “Huh, are you okay?! Omg, Rena-chan, take care of yourself!”

How was I supposed to sit there and play the PS4 like that? Was my spirit already broken? When summer break ended, I would definitely not be going back to school. I could never face Ajisai-san again. I’d stop talking to my family, and, of course, getting a job would be out of the question. I’d just stay in my room playing video games until I died. That was the punishment for one who dared deceive an angel.

Okay, enough of that.

I used the very last of the strength left to me from this day’s ordeal to send her a reply.

Sounds like a plan!

God, I loved writing. No matter how shitty my mood, I could always add exclamation points and come across as perfectly chipper. I wish I were made of words.

I lay there recovering my will to live, my head completely out of it, until it was time for dinner. I removed my makeup and went down to the dining table, whereupon my sister giggled.

“Hey, do you want a piece of my fried chicken?” she asked me in a wheedling voice, looking all too pleased with herself. Freaky.

“N-nah, I’m good…” I said.

“Aww, really? Okay. Hey, you remember how my friend said she wanted to get your number?”

“Look,” I said, “I know this is the pot calling the kettle black, but I want to say this anyway…”

“S-say what?”

I silently shook my head. “You really shouldn’t piggyback off of other peoples’ achievements to make yourself look better. It’ll only come back to bite you in the butt later.”

My sister gulped. Normally, she was the one who lived on the

straight and narrow, so she took a critical hit from my rare bullseye.

"I can't believe you're actually telling me off," she said. "This is the most mortifying thing I've ever experienced in my life."

"Hey, keep your opinions to yourself!"

***

I left the house just past noon the next day. Last night, in order to prepare for today, I'd gone to bed two hours early. Alas, I was so worried about flubbing up in front of Ajisai-san (or pestering her in some way, or even making her hate me) that I spent a full two hours practicing our conversation in my head…meaning I ended up going to sleep at the exact same time as usual anyway. Bah.

The sun shone high in the late July sky overhead, sapping me of my energy on the road to the train station. *Please, sun, could you cut a girl a break?* I begged.

I made it to the station, dragging myself along all the way, and got on the train. We'd planned to meet three stations away at the closest stop to Ajisai-san's house. Suddenly accosted by a blast of cool air, my stomach took the opportunity to start hurting in earnest. I'd been looking forward to this for ages and ages, and now I was so nervous my fingers and toes had gone numb. I mean, it was one thing to offer to hang out after school when you were already there, but it was a whole other thing to go out of your way to spend time together over summer vacation.

God, I should have canceled. I wasn't cut out to fulfill the sacred duty of going over to Ajisai-san's house. Once I was there, Ajisai-san might get tired of me and think, "Rena-chan's fun to chat with at school, but spending a long time with her one-on-one kinda sucks lmao." The thought of her abandoning me terrified me. As yesterday had proved, I really wasn't all that great. I tried with all my might to make myself seem grander than I was, but I was only pretending, and the prospect of anyone discovering my true mediocrity filled me with horror. What if I tried to procrastinate or run away somehow? At least that meant I wouldn't have to worry about her finding out.

I looked weirdly sick in the reflection of the train window. I'd only put on a little makeup, like normal, and I'd fixed my bangs nicely

enough, but maybe I should have spent more time on them anyway.

As I anguished, the train carried me closer and closer to my destination. Finally, I stepped out and onto the platform. My heart was pounding in my chest as I passed through the ticket gate, and then…

"Oh, Rena-chan! Over here," she called. Like a lone flower in bloom, there stood Ajisai-san.

I couldn't help it. I screamed, "Oh my god! You're the cutest thing ever!"

"Huh?!" she said.

This was my first time ever seeing her in anything but a uniform. I felt cooler just looking at her pale, delicate arms peeking out from her floral, sleeveless blouse. Their radiance was such that I, who normally never, ever got to see them, couldn't help but clasp my hands together in worship. Her long skirt hugged her waist, giving Ajisai-san the delicate charm of a cute girl on top of all the trends. To complete the masterpiece, her tiny toes peeped out of her blue sandals (I think they're called mules) painted pink in a manicure (*that's called a pedicure, Renako*). It seemed like a perfect reflection of Ajisai-san's liberal mood to dress up a little fancier for summer vacation. She was just too cute. She was magnificent, a winner.

"You are literally too cute," I told her. "Oh my god. Ajisai-san, what happened to you this summer? How did you get to be so adorable?"

Wait, that wasn't right. Ajisai-san had been astronomically cute from the moment we'd first met. It was just like when I'd seen Mai again for the first time in ages. I realized then that I was treated to unbelievably gorgeous girls on a daily basis at school. It was like if I got to eat gourmet fatty tuna belly and Matsusaka beef every day for lunch and then was like, "You know, come to think of it, this food's not half bad!"

After I warbled at her, she said, "Aww! Thanks, you make me smile."

She beamed at me and flashed me double peace signs. As her silky hair swayed in the wind, even the sun that threatened to melt the

asphalt seemed to mellow out. Maybe Ajisai-san was the ultimate weapon against global warming.

Then she looked away, lacing her fingers together bashfully in front of her chest. “Well, uh,” she began, “I mean… It’s been so long since I’ve seen you that I may have gone a little overboard in prepping to come meet you today. You don’t think that’s weird, right?”

“Not at all! Wait, actually—yeah, that’s weird as heck! In the sense that it’s weird how you’re so cute!”

“You think so?” she asked.

“I know so,” I affirmed. “It’s so bad I thought my eyes were going funny. Ajisai-san, you’re not some kind of fairy that’s invisible to everyone else but me, right?”

“U-uh, Rena-chan, I think we should get you to somewhere cool.”

Great. I’d made her worried about me.

Oh, but whatever. When I looked at her face, all my anxiety just melted away. I felt thrilled, as if I’d waited in line for ages and now it was the moment for the roller coaster to start. What was there to worry about? Ajisai-san and I were sure to have a good time. I’d just do my best so the two of us could both have a *great* time!

With a big grin, I said, “Thanks for having me today, Ajisai-san!”

“Any time, Rena-chan.”

Now I finally felt like my summer vacation had begun. Ahh! Today was going to be the best day of my life!

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story: Prologue

SHE BREATHED a sigh of relief and ran down the list of notes on her phone, checking each off in turn.

First up: room cleaning. Check.

She'd given more than just the living room a thorough tidying and vacuuming. She'd also cleaned the bathroom and her bedroom, although she doubted that the latter would be showing its face to Renako anytime soon.

Next up on her list: making the food. Check.

Yesterday, she'd used her many years of experience since elementary school to make her signature baked cheesecake. Ajisai had also stocked up on drinks, including plenty of milk for her brothers so that they wouldn't drink all the goodies for her guest.

All that was left on the list was putting on her makeup and outfit for the day.

"I hope this is all right," she told herself.

…Check?

Ajisai stood before the mirror in her room, turning this way and that to make sure her hair looked okay. She'd been lax on some of her routines recently since babysitting her brothers had taken up her whole summer so far. It'd been so long since she'd last done her hair properly that it ended up taking longer than planned. Thankfully, she had a special burst of motivation to do it right today…! Or, actually, not really… Well, maybe she did.

At any rate, there was still a bit more time before she needed to go, so she decided to fix her hair just a tad.

"It's been two months since we made that promise," she said, "what with everything happening." Was this impatience Ajisai felt from being made to wait too long? Yes, it had to have been.

"She was so cute back then, what with how earnest she was," Ajisai recalled.

Ajisai felt hot just thinking about it. That was the first time she'd ever received such flagrant affection, and frankly, it had made quite the impact on her.

"Oh, drat, I'm thinking about it again. Stop that," she chastised herself.

Ajisai shook her head. She and Renako weren't like that; she *swore.* Ajisai was only making this extra effort because she wanted to make sure her friend had a good time, especially now that Renako was honoring her promise to hang out.

Ajisai liked promises. They made her feel like she had a clear connection, one that would allow for mutual honesty. Promises were all the better when each side worked their hardest to make them come to fruition. It was like saying, "You're important to me, and I know that I'm important to you," a sort of conversation from one heart to another. She understood that this might have been a bit of an exaggeration, but all the same, promises made her feel so much happier and so much more secure.

At any rate, Renako was now honoring her promise to Ajisai, which was why she was so excited…and also why her heart had started beating ever so slightly faster. That was the only reason why, of course. There was nothing else. It'd have been unthinkable.

It was almost time to meet Renako now, so Ajisai left her bedroom and called out into the living room, "I'm going out for a minute to pick up a friend!"

Ajisai had told her brothers ahead of time that a girl her age who was a really good gamer was coming over for a playdate. She had no idea if they'd remembered or not, but since there was so little else going on in their lives this summer, she figured they'd be all over Renako with excitement once she actually showed up.

Ajisai slipped on a pair of light blue sandals and opened the front door.

The sun was so strong when it struck her that she unintentionally squealed. "What great weather!" She squinted up at the sky.

The Japanese rainy season called to mind a certain flower, the hydrangea, that bloomed from May through early July. In Japanese, it was called the ajisai. And even if this was a bit late for hydrangea season, *this* Ajisai was in full bloom as she skipped down the road under

that hot, summer sun.

“I can’t wait to see you, Rena-chan,” she giggled to herself.

***

This was Sena Ajisai, and this was her first year of high school. Just as if it had come up from behind and dashed past her, her unforgettable summer love story had begun.

Chapter 1:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Visit Ajisai-san's House!

AJISAI-SAN'S PLACE was a single, family-style home in a residential neighborhood. It was painted white and looked just about as cute as she was.

"Come on in," she said. "Make yourself at home."

"Th-thank you for having me." For some reason, this came out as a whisper.

I slipped through the entrance and entered the terra incognita of Ajisai-san's house. From here on out, I knew I'd be repeating a lot of the same things in sheer amazement, but please bear with me. I couldn't help it. I'll even count them out for you. Because, I mean, I'd just *set foot* in Ajisai-san's house. (#2)

She led me through the cool, air-conditioned living room and had me sit on the couch. I gingerly took a seat. This was the sofa that Ajisai-san normally sat on in the house Ajisai lived in. (#3) The signature icon of this sacred being…

"We have barley tea, coffee, black tea, orange juice—what do you want, Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Oh, don't worry about me. But, um, I guess I'll take some orange juice."

"Coming right up."

As Ajisai-san brought the drinks over, I looked around the room. Wow. So this was Ajisai-san's house, the place where she was born and raised. (#4) There was a big TV, this comfy couch, and a long wooden table. Kids' clothes, toys, notebooks, and writing utensils were scattered everywhere or shoved to the side to make room. It sure seemed like little kids lived here.

Unconsciously, I looked about for any traces of Ajisai-san's childhood. Were there any marks on the walls marking child Ajisai-san's growth? Oh, there was one of her textbooks on the table! So Ajisai-san really did live here! (#5)

Ajisai-san came back in as I was in the midst of what even I could recognize to be pretty disgusting behavior.

"Here you go," she said.

"Ah, thanks."

Ajisai-san sat down next to me and turned the TV on with the remote. "Oh hey, I want to play that game we were going to try the other day," she said.

"Sure," I said. "Of course. That's fine by me."

She giggled. "Goody. Oh, but maybe we could chat too, before that."

Ajisai-san started the game up with a grin, controller in hand.

"Wh-whichever one you prefer," I said.

Watching Ajisai-san make these habitual movements made me realize, *Ah, so this is how Ajisai-san goes about her daily life…* (#6) I felt like a total creep. I guess this proved Ajisai-san really was a gamer… Well, I mean, I knew that. We'd played a game before and everything.

"So whatcha been up to lately, Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Huh? Lately? Um… Uh."

Here it was! My turn in the conversation! My brain was already grappling with the very difficult task of not losing all of my wits by sheer virtue of being in Ajisai-san's house, so I had no choice but to rely on the last bit of space in my cerebral cortex. *Okay, lately, lately.*

The most immediate big event was Mai's fashion show, but I was the only one who had been invited. Ajisai-san didn't know that Mai and I were friends with Renafits, so I had a feeling that telling her about the show would only cause trouble. But without that, I had zero things to talk about.

"I've been doing homework, playing video games… You know, just lounging around enjoying the cool air from the A/C…"

No way! My well of conversational topics had gone dry in this heat wave.

"That sounds nice," she said. "How far along are you with the homework?"

"I'm about halfway done," I said, "but I've barely even started on

the math."

"Yeah, I totally feel you. All the problems suck. Did you do that one page? The whole thing's filled with diagrams."

"Yeah, oh my god, it was such a pain in the ass! And the next one's just as bad…"

But when Ajisai-san guided me, even a desert oasis transformed into a cascade of conversation! I had no idea I could jabber on this much. It felt so good to be back together with her. Normally, my conversations stopped dead after two back-and-forths, but now I felt so good I was almost beginning to wonder if I had a latent talent for this.

Just as I looked over at her, thinking that this was all due to the wonder of Ajisai-san, a glimpse of her unprotected upper arm leaped out at me. It looked so soft, sweeter than any dessert imaginable. I averted my eyes as quickly as I could. This house was packed with danger for me! Somebody, help me!

Before I could say "What am I doing here? I need to go home!" Ajisai-san turned the conversation back to me.

"Rena-chan," she asked, "do you work a part-time job or anything?"

"Huh?" I said. "No way! I could never."

"Really?"

Oh no… She looked so puzzled, and her head was tilted at such a confused angle… She just looked too darn cute that way…

I mumbled, "I mean, the only places that give out part-time jobs are karaoke parlors and family restaurants and stuff, you know? They all involve talking to strangers and whatnot… I could never."

"Aww, come on, don't say that," she protested. "You totally could."

I totally could *not*! She could only say that so lightly because she had no idea who I really was. Mind you, that was because I was so insistent on her never finding that out! *Ah ha ha!* Oh, me! What a socially awkward mess I was! Wait, but maybe this was actually a good thing. It meant that my extrovert act was pretty good, right? After all, I was able to pull the wool over Ajisai-san's eyes. That thought alone boosted my self-esteem, and I ignored the (internal?) voice from the outfield screaming, *Why are you proud of tricking people?!*

“Oh, but I forgot,” she said. “You’re not good with boys.”

“Y-yeah, I guess… I’m really not.”

To be more precise, it was less boys in general and more the boys who had their shit together. I just felt the urge to apologize for making them look at me. So I was more okay with small kids, or the younger boys who went around like “I like hitting girls!” I think? Okay, no, those were freaky too. Hard pass for me.

I must have made a face, because Ajisai-san’s eyebrows drooped in worry. Oh, no, at this rate, she was going to take it as a sensitive topic (not to mention, she’d already seen me faint around a couple of guys!), and I hurried to backpedal.

“It’s not like anything happened, I swear. I just never really was around guys that much in elementary school or junior high, so I don’t know what to talk about. It’s that kind of thing.”

Yeah, there we go, that sounded good. I nodded at my own words.

I went on, “See, boys are like, mmm… Well, they’re boys, right? They’re all big and burly, and they don’t get periods like we do… They’re basically a different species, you know?”

See, with girls at least I could carry on a conversation with two back-and-forths. With boys, you weren’t going to get a whimper out of me.

“Huh? Well, I guess,” she said. “But you must have guys coming up to talk to you sometimes, right?”

“Well, sure, if you count the customer service robot at the phone store…”

“I don’t think he counts!”

I had wanted to say something like, *Oh yeah, I mean if the guys at school strike up a conversation, I always talk back,* but instead I’d settled on that really stupid answer.

“I mean, the only time they ever talk to me is when I’m with you, Kaho-chan, or Oduka-san,” I pointed out.

Those three were the main dude magnets in our group. Satsuki-san never talked with anybody, so she was safer. Hey, wait—did that mean that Satsuki-san was actually an introvert too?

Putting a lid on my budding suspicion, I asked Ajisai-san, “Uh, so

what do you talk about with them?"

"Huh? Oh, you know. Just normal stuff. We talk about movies or friends or whatnot."

"You're brilliant," I said. "You can actually make contact with them. You're fluent in Ja-*man*-ese."

"What the heck is Ja-man-ese?"

I'd never studied it in my life, so I couldn't tell her.

"Anyway," I went on, "there's no particular reason why I don't talk to guys. I'm sure that being in the friend group will give me more chances to interact with them and gradually warm up to them. The key word being gradually, mind you."

"Sure thing. You know, once you learn how to talk to them, the boys are going to be all over you."

"Nuh-uh!" I protested.

"Huh, you really think?" she said.

"If I ever get popular with the guys, it's only because I'm a fail-safe," I told her.

"What do you mean by that?"

I meant that if a guy asked out one of the other four in Mai's friend group and got rejected, he could still ask me out to win that coveted "I'm dating someone in Mai's friend group! (Score!)" status. Actually, given that, I figured I'd end up shockingly popular. Mwa ha ha, that's right. Even the strategy guides said that Amaori Renako was a random loser in the midst of that friend group, so I was the one to go after. Damn those guides; it hurt to be looked down upon.

Ajisai-san brightly switched topics, probably due to that weird, leering grin I gave her. "Hey, did you know that I've been thinking about getting a job lately?"

"Wait, you have?!"

"Huh, is it really that surprising? I was just thinking it'd be fun to get out of the house and work somewhere."

I gave it another thought. *Was* it surprising…? Honestly, not at all. I could totally see her working at a trendy bakery or being the cute girl at the pastry shop all the customers flocked to catch a glimpse of.

Oh, and she'd be great at working for a florist too. Every morning, she'd set out the signs on the street corner, causing all the passersby—teens on their way to school, adults on their way to work—to make a quick detour to drop by and see her. She'd greet them all with a "Good morning!" and spread happiness far and wide. I could see it now: a sweet little town in the hills overlooking the ocean, the happiest place in the whole universe.

"No, that sounds nice," I said. "I think it's a great idea."

"I was thinking that I'd really love to work in a clothes store or something."

"Uh!" That gave me pause. "Like a retail worker…? You mean, like someone who marches right up to you, goes, 'Oh, I have that *exact* thing you're looking at!' and interrupts you when you're trying to mind your own business browsing?"

"I don't think that's the point of them going up to you, but yes! They're supposed to be friendly, like, 'Hi, is there anything I can help you with?'"

Nah, nah, nah… That was a bad idea. If she came up to them with her smile and her sweetness, the customers would totally fall in love with her. Then they'd keep coming back and waste all their money just to be around her. But Ajisai-san wouldn't even notice as she went around mass-producing tons of people like me and climbing her way to the position of top salesperson. Nope, no two ways about, this spelled trouble. If all her admirers were asocial weirdos, who knows what they could come up with? Maybe they'd stalk her or try to approach her on the street! *You're too kind to them!* I thought. *It's your fault for giving them the wrong idea!*

Gaah! She shouldn't go down this route. Working in retail was fraught with way too much peril for Ajisai-san!

"Don't you have any other ideas?" I suggested.

"Hmm, good question. I could maybe work at a bar or something. That sounds really upbeat and fun."

"Nooooo!"

"Huh?"

I looked directly into her eyes and pleaded with her. "If you work at a bar, you'll get harassed by all the drunken customers! Or what if

you get a hot, college-aged coworker who tries to make a pass at you? This is dangerous, I'm telling you!"

"Wh-what?"

"Ajisai-san, I wish you could go work on an assembly line at a bread factory…where you'd have to wear a hairnet and a mask and not say a word to anyone all day. You'd just punch your time card, clock in and clock out. At lunch, you'd sit in the big, empty cafeteria and eat the company-provided bread all by yourself."

"That sounds lonely!"

But it was for Ajisai-san's own good!

"Hey, Ajisai-san," I said, "if you really want to get a job, go work at the Queen Donut in front of Kawasen Station. That'd be safe. I mean…"

"You mean what?"

I suddenly stopped short. I mean, that's where Satsuki-san worked, so I'd figured that Satsuki-san could be Ajisai-san's bodyguard. But just when I had been about to suggest it, the Satsuki-san in my mind grinned at me and went, "Amaori?" before going for my throat.

I looked away, not meeting Ajisai-san's eyes. "Because I mean, you know… I hear they give all their female waitresses handguns there."

"Wait, is that even an urban legend?!"

I mean, not really. But there really was an urban waitress whose desire to kill was as lethal as any pistol.

Ajisai-san laughed at my absurd joke and then followed it up with a little sigh. "Well, it's not like I have the time to get a job anyway," she said.

"You don't?"

"Yeah, no. It's summer vacation, right? I need to watch the boys for my mom, so it means I can't go out anywhere or even get out of the house to work."

"Oh. Wow."

"I mean, it's not like there's anything I can do about it, since both my parents have to work. It's always been like this too."

I wasn't sure whether or not I should have been like "Dang, that

sounds rough," and as I worried over whether I should lob some easy words of sympathy at her, Ajisai-san cut that train of thought short.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I kinda went off on a weird tangent there. Come on, let's start playing already."

"O-okay."

Talking about people's home situations was anxiety inducing. My parents were still together, and all my folks got along okay. Sure, my sister was a pest, but I was still pretty lucky. So from where I stood, it was hard for me to really empathize with other people. Besides, it wasn't like there was anything anyone could do to change their family, you know? In the end, you were stuck with the environment you were born into. I guess I could have been like, "Wow, I didn't realize you had that going on," or something. So maybe the problem was just that I was being overly defensive. No, wait, I got it! *Someone, please prepare a script in advance and give me a cue card!* I thought. *So I can practice it beforehand!*

Don't mind me, I was just struggling over there. And just then, a little figure scooted into the edge of my vision. *Oh?* I thought.

"Huh? What's up, Kii-kun?" Ajisai-san asked.

It was her little brother! And he was so *widdle*! With the fluffy hair sprouting out of his head, he was as adorable as a baby animal. I figured he had to have been in his first couple of years of elementary school, and something about his cherubic face tugged at my heartstrings. It was my first time ever seeing him, so why did I feel so… so…? Just then, it hit me. This boy reminded me of Ajisai-san! It was in the hair, and his eyes looked just like hers too!

I vowed then and there to watch out for and nurture this boy with love for as long as I lived. *Don't worry,* I thought, *Renako-oneechan will always look out for you.*

The boy wrapped himself around her leg. Oh god, he had zero reservation about touching her! *No! Stop!* I thought. *That's going too far!* How come I never got to touch Ajisai-san's legs, huh? I-I couldn't let this little brat do it and get away with it! Did he roll the great gacha of life to have the honor of being reborn as Ajisai-san's little brother? Heck, could I go be a little brother too?

A vein was about to pop out of my forehead at the sight of this little tyke when…another little boy appeared, a size-up copy of the one

before. Oh god, he was too cute! So these were her younger brothers.

“What, not you too, Kou-kun?” Ajisai-san said. “Do you want to play with us? Oh, fine, I guess I have no choice. Okay, but you need to say hi to my friend first. Can you do that?”

Hiding behind Ajisai-oneechan all the while, the boys fidgeted out an embarrassed hello to me. The older boy was a third grader named Kouki, and the younger one was a first grader named Kippei. Both boys had the honor of sharing Ajisai-san’s genes, so I nearly fell prostrate to the ground in front of them.

As I waged an internal war against my lowly peasanthood, she said to her brothers, “This is the friend who I said is really good at video games, remember? Don’t be too selfish and bother her now. Okay? Can you both keep your promise? Remember, Renako-oneechan is here to play with me.”

The boys nodded as she repeated herself. Clinging to their Ajisai-oneechan all the while, they picked up controllers.

“Sorry, Rena-chan,” she said. “Would you mind humoring them for a bit?”

“Nah, of course not. I mean, that was the plan to begin with, right?”

Sweet! This was my chance to show off in front of Ajisai-san. This game was a co-op third-person shooter, a nice wholesome one without age restrictions, for both kids and adults to enjoy. I was a bit concerned that kids this young wouldn’t get the rules or have much fun with it, but hey, I started playing when I was in first grade and never looked back. Still, compared to how I used to be back then, there was a world of difference in my skills. So, with that in mind, it was time to show them how an adult played video games!

For a while, it was all:

“Oneechan, you’re awesome!”

“Hey, Kippei! It’s my turn next.”

“Say what? Hurry up and switch off!”

“Check out that last stage, check out that last stage!”

Ajisai-san’s prediction had been right; the boys were all over me.

It kind of threw me for a loop that I could get so much recognition just for being good at video games. It was the first time in my life I'd ever felt popular. Well, maybe not the first time, per se. Just a little while ago, Mai and Satsuki-san had been fighting over me nonstop, but that was different, wasn't it?

At any rate, where had my earlier shyness gone off to? Kouki-san and Kippei-san were having the time of their lives, and with all their encouragement, I was just sitting there playing game after game. I was gaming so much I was starting to wonder if there'd be an issue with me doing nothing else all day.

"Sorry, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said. "I feel bad for making you entertain them."

"Nah, don't mention it. It's fun, so I don't mind!" I said.

I wasn't trying to humor her or anything either. Playing games with other people was such a rare event for me that I didn't even mind if my co-op buddies happened to be a bunch of weak little kiddos. It was genuinely fun. Still, I figured the sentiment would be hard to get across to someone like Ajisai-san, who always had tons of people around her.

"Let's get to a good stopping place and go to my room," she suggested.

"Sure, sure… Wait, say what now?"

Ajisai-san's *room*?! Did she by any chance mean the room that she slept in on a daily basis?! (Coming in late, but here's #7) And she wanted to invite me there? Wasn't that too much? Was this what… *friends* did?

My heartbeat started accelerating oddly, but I focused my attention back on the screen as the game sped up. By the way, I think this is a good time to mention something: I didn't have the faintest clue how to get to a good stopping place.

"Hey, Kou-kun, Kii-kun," she said, "we're going to my room in a sec, so you guys gotta wrap it up."

"Aww, come on! Give us a few more minutes!"

“Hey, Rena-chan. I made a cheesecake today. Want to give it a try?” she offered.

“O-oh, yeah, I’d love to!” I said. “Just as soon as I’m done with this round!”

“Look, boys, you have homework to get to, right?” she tried again.

“We already did it this morning!”

“Hey, it’s my turn now! Come ooon, Kippei.”

We kept playing on and on, swept up in the game like it was a river of muddy water. And that’s when Ajisai-san snapped.

“JEEEEEEEEEEEZ!”

What was that? At that very moment, the world came to a halt. I froze so hard I couldn’t breathe. Was that…Ajisai-san just now? A part of me refused to look to the source of that frightening noise even as another part of me battled it with the need to react. Slowly, I turned my head.

She shook her fists up and down, and her face was bright red. There was no doubt about it. That had been Ajisai-san screaming! My heart raced. It was the first time I’d ever heard her raise her voice outside of music class—at school, no one dared miss a word Ajisai-san said.

Her face a mask of pouting anger, she grabbed Kouki-san and Kippei-san by the head like they were a couple of melons.

“Jeez!” she cried. “It’s been all about you, you, you for hours now! Rena-chan came to play with me! Didn’t you promise me? Jeez! You promised me you’d stop playing at three o’clock, didn’t you? Jeez!”

Just like when a teacher suddenly blows their lid while the whole class studies seriously, I was completely baffled. But I was the only one, because when I snuck a glance to the side, Kouki-san and Kippei-san were…

…still playing! Were they so used to these outbursts that they didn't even listen? What on earth?! True, I did recall that Ajisai-san had once said something to this effect… But did this mean the hair-trigger-temper oneechan wasn't just another one of those urban legends? Was this an everyday thing?

"Are you even listening to me?" she screamed. "I'm really, really angry, okay? Don't you get that? Jeez!"

Jeez-ing away all the while, she snatched the controllers from their hands. The boys shouted back in protest and turned on her. The situation was devolving into a full-on sibling fight here at someone else's house. *Ohhhh my god,* I thought.

This was well beyond what I could handle, and I didn't know what to think. While I sat there frozen, Ajisai-san sent the boys packing back into their rooms.

Now she was left with heavy breathing and wild hair. "Jeez… jeez!" she panted. Her back was turned to me, so I couldn't see her face.

Uh… I was so nervous that if I made even the tiniest sound, she'd blow up on me too. If even a hundredth of Ajisai-san's anger was aimed in my direction, I'd evaporate on the spot like a little lost sheep who'd dared stray away from god.

Sweat pouring off of me everywhere, I sat up properly on the couch.

"…Rena-chan," she said.

My whole body shook. "Y-yeah…?"

I no longer cared who was responsible for this. My sole concern was figuring out the best moment to grovel on the ground in front of her to dispel this awful tension.

Ajisai-san slowly buried her face in her hands. Her ears were bright red where they peeked out through her hair.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that…" she groaned.

Urgh… Wh-what was I supposed to do? It crossed the back of my

mind to be all like, “Huh, whatcha talking about? I didn’t see anything! I was busy gaming!” and round it off with a cheeky little giggle and stuck-out-tongue grin. But with my current stats, that option wasn’t really available to me.

“U-um…it’s okay,” I said. I just agreed with her, without trying to put any humorous spin on it.

Then, sounding like she was about to waste away, she whimpered, “I’m so mortified.”

Oh nooo… I’d embarrassed her!

“I-it’s okay!” I insisted.

Gosh darn it, Ajisai-san was so cute even when she was embarrassed! But she needed to be upbeat at all times, because lord knows, I certainly couldn’t be!

Chucking my shame and sense of dignity out the window, I decided to do my very best to cheer her up.

“Um, uh, you know, my sister and I fight all the time too. We’re always going back and forth calling each other names. Seriously, we curse at each other and everything. I guess with family, sometimes you just gotta love and hate them at the same time, right? I think every family’s like that! Right? Uh, right?”

She whimpered.

“Or,” I said, trying a different tack, “you know how people act differently at school versus at home, right? It’s totally normal! I’m a way different person at home too. I mean, that’s just a fact, right? So, yeah, you did kind of startle me, but it’s not… Um… Anyway, it’s all good! Right?”

But no matter how much I tried and tried (and boy, did I try) to cheer her up, Ajisai-san didn’t perk back up into her usual bright and bubbly self. If anything, the more frantic I became, the more upset she got. It was a vicious cycle!

“Oh, I love the cake,” I said. “It’s really good! Right, Ajisai-san? Right?”

“Uh-huh…” she said.

Alas, it was a horrid waste of Ajisai-san’s special cheesecake, because I was so distracted I couldn’t taste a bite of it.

***

"I'm home…" I called.

"Welcome back," my sister said.

The minute I stepped through the door, I face-planted onto the couch like a corpse. I was tired with a capital T. Trying to cheer up a depressed person made me feel like I'd given someone a blood transfusion before they bled out. I felt drained.

My sister, playing on her phone as she sat with her knees tucked up under her on a dining room chair, asked, "What's wrong?"

I groaned like a zombie right back at her.

"Didn't you go hang out at Ajisai-senpai's house?" she asked.

"I did, but…" My limbs still buried in the couch, I turned only my head so I could see her. "So, you see…"

I was on the fence about it for a brief moment, but in the end, I told her everything. Honestly, something about my sister made her easy to talk to. She was a good listener. She nodded understandingly as I talked about the boys butting in on our hangout, me playing only with them, and Ajisai-san blowing up. Then I went on to say how Ajisai-san had been so gloomy afterwards.

The smartphone still in one hand, my sister's face lit up with a look of understanding. "Oh, I get it," she said. "Ajisai-san must have really been looking forward to hanging out with you."

"Say what now?" I asked. That had come so far out of left field I wondered if my sister had even been listening to me.

But my sister read my mind. "I mean, she was upset because they got in the way of you spending time with her, you know?"

"Huh?" Nah, that couldn't have been i—huh?

"You mean, like, she's kinda mad at them all the time, and then today was the straw that broke the camel's back…right?"

"Ajisai-senpai doesn't look like the kind of person to be like that," my sister said.

Okay, fair, I thought.

“In that case,” I said, “then I bet it was just because she’s so nice. She must have been worried about not being a good enough host to someone who came over.”

“I mean, maybe.”

A cold wind blew across my heart when my sister relented that easily. I realized then, to my great dismay, that I had unconsciously been hoping she’d have refuted me with something sweet like, “No way! Ajisai-senpai cares about you way too much for that! <3” Maybe I should have just up and died.

“Well, she sure has been dealing with a lot of stress lately,” my sister said. “I think she has to babysit her little brothers all summer too.”

“Yeah, that’s true…”

Hm? Hey, wait a sec. How come my sister knew that? Even I hadn’t known that until today. Had she actually gotten Ajisai-san’s number?

“I mean, I couldn’t babysit you year-round either,” my sister said.

“Wait, wouldn’t it be the other way around?”

My sister sighed, shrugged in defeat, and then shot me an impudent smirk. I wished I could swap her out for Ajisai-san’s little brothers. Actually…well, that would have presented its own set of issues.

“So it’s summer, and she can’t go anywhere, huh?” I muttered as I lay face down, sprawled across the couch. I wondered how that made her feel. I tried to imagine her distress, but I just couldn’t get a good grasp on it. I mean, I was a recluse at heart. I didn’t see the big deal in not leaving the house. Ah, but I suppose if I was stuck with my sister 24/7, that would be pretty nasty. What if I couldn’t get any time to myself? I’d wither up into a husk.

I pulled my phone out of my bag and started mindlessly fiddling with it. At first glance, it may have just looked like I was wasting time, but I was actually recovering my MP. Phones are modern-day MP potions.

Ajisai-san’s name suddenly flashed across my screen. Wait. Huh? What? Was she calling me?

I scrambled to my feet and charged out of the living room. As I

dashed to my room, I picked up the call.

"Hey…Rena-chan?" she said in her sweet voice.

"Uh, yeah, that's me."

"Uh-huh… I'm sorry about what happened earlier."

I felt slightly relieved. Her apologetic voice was gentle, and I could hear that she had calmed down too. Maybe she'd patched things up with her brothers after I'd gone home. Good. That was really, really good to hear.

"No, not at all," I said. After all, I didn't care a bit about it anymore.

Yet she said, "We had to wait all this time to get together, and then I just made you feel rotten…"

"Y-you really didn't," I insisted. "Plus, I got to see your usual self and all. It was kinda, uh, fun to see this new side of you!"

"I'm really, really sorry."

She sounded so down in the dumps as she apologized again that my stomach twisted itself in knots. Her emotive voice, so excellent at informing me when she was in a pleasant mood, was unfortunately just as apt at expressing her guilt.

"No, don't be…" I said. She was the one always doing things for me at school, after all. Seriously, just how much did she do to help me out on a regular basis? I figured I'd need to give up an arm or two to her to settle the score. Well, I'd never actually suggest that, since the offer would only bother her. It's not like she needed my arms anyway.

At any rate, hearing Ajisai-san all upset on my behalf was super, super painful, so, in the most chipper tone I could manage, I told her, "Yeah, don't worry! It's fine! I'll just come over to hang out some other time."

"Uh-huh…"

Urgh… Great, so that wasn't any good either, huh? I bet she was thinking that our next hang-out would just end up being a repeat of this one.

I wondered how in the world I could get her to perk back up. Was there even anything I was capable of doing?

I was dangerously close to going, "Ajisai-san, I'll give you 10,000

yen!" when she announced, "At any rate, I've made up my mind."

Hmm? She sounded different now. Heck, she didn't need my 10,000 yen. She was capable of picking herself back up, which just went to show that she was our Ajisai-san!

Following her lead, I asked, all upbeat, "Ooh, about what?"

"Um, well…" She sounded like she was telling me about a secret plan when she whispered in that adorable voice of hers.

"I've decided to run away from home."

Oh, really? Cool…

Wait. Hold the phone. Wha—huuuuuuuh?!

***

Ajisai-san planned to leave on the first train tomorrow morning. She seemed like she was actually going to go through with it. I didn't know what to say, so I sat there looking like an idiot and said, "Everyone's going to be really worried about you…"

But Ajisai-san stuck to her guns and said, "Nah, it's fine. It'll be fine." She'd already made up her mind.

"It's totally fine," she went on. "I'm not, like, at my wits' end or anything."

I could hear the smile in her voice, so all my objections were reduced to mere mumbling.

That night, as I lay in bed, I had a hard time falling asleep. *Ajisai-san…* I thought. Even if she wasn't at her wit's end, I still felt like she'd had enough and wanted to have things her own way for once. This didn't seem like something Ajisai-san, who was normally so prudent, would do. As my sister had said, she really must have been under a lot of stress.

Ugh, I thought. I wondered what I should have said to her. Maybe I should have pointed out that this would cause her family no end of trouble, or maybe I should have said that her little brothers would feel

sorry once she was gone. Maybe if I'd nagged at her enough, she would have felt guilty enough to call the whole thing off. (Let's just ignore the question of whether I could actually pull that off.)

This all came about because Ajisai-san was such a nice person who always put everyone else first. But if I managed to stop her, I knew she'd only end up looking upset again. She'd be all dejected and go, "Yeah… You're right. I guess I lost my cool for a minute there, huh?"

When I imagined looking at her, giving me a weak little smile like that… God. I felt so choked up I thought I might die.

If she talked to her family about it and they made her stop, then I was sure she'd keep on trucking, just grinning and bearing it the next time something similar happened. She was, after all, the kind of person who would favor someone else's happiness over her own.

Ughhhhh. At a total loss for what to do, I tossed and turned.

She could at least go out to karaoke or work off some steam at a batting cage! Why had she decided to run away, of all things? Come on, Ajisai-san. That was dangerous! There was no freaking way Ajisai-san could make a trip on her own. Boys would be accosting her left and right! Was Ajisai-san going to have a summer fling?! What if she was swayed by the words of a nice boy, fell in love, and came home just a tad more grown up? Well, I mean, even that had its perks… But what if she got conned by some sketchy dude? Or what if she fell in with a naughty girl and got strung along, only to be abandoned in the end?!

Naughty Girl: Hey, sweetheart, are you alone? Oh, you've run away from home? You poor thing. You wanna come back to my place? Don't you worry. I won't do aaaanything to you, I promise.

Ajisai: Oh, are you sure? Hooray, thank you so much!

No! Ajisai-san was too kind and had zero sense of caution. She'd get preyed on for sure! When she came back from summer break, she'd have turned into one of those ganguro girls—those chicks with the over-the-top tans and bleached hair—wearing her uniform like a crop top and showing up at school with a casual "Heeeeeeey!" After school, she'd be like, "Sorry, gals, I've got a date with girlfriend number three today," and then there'd be nothing for it but to watch her traipse off in high

spirits. It would be the end of me… Here I thought I'd managed to become her friend after a lot of hard effort, and now this summer she was getting duped and falling into depravity. Pretty soon, she'd be dropping out of school, and I'd never get to hang out with her again…

No, no, a thousand times no! I had zero confidence that I could make it through school without Ajisai-san. After all, Mai and Kaho-chan were always getting snatched up by other friend groups. Without Ajisai-san, who the heck could I even talk to? Satsuki-san? Satsuki-san didn't talk to *anyone* at school!

I felt like I was about to explode, so I buried my head in my blanket. *No, Ajisai-san, don't go…* I whimpered internally. *Don't abandon me… Stay with me forever. Please stay with me, so that whenever no one's around at school and I start going loopy, you can come talk to me with your sweet, sweet voice, Ajisai-san… Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.*

I barely got a wink of sleep that whole night. And then, the next day…

***

"Huh?" she said.

It was real early in the morning, so early the cicadas hadn't even started screaming yet. There was no wind, and not a soul under that clear sky. And yet, when Ajisai-san came up to the train station with a backpack, her eyes grew wide.

"Rena-chan?" she asked.

Because, for some bizarre reason, there I was.

"H-heya, Ajisai-san!" I said.

I flashed her a weak little smile and gave her the tiniest of waves.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

I had a big backpack of my own, stuffed with a couple changes of clothes and some other crap, and the two of us looked just like friends who had agreed beforehand to meet up and go hang out somewhere. Mind you, I had invited myself along entirely without asking.

“Uh, you know. I just suddenly felt like going for a trip…I guess,” I said. She’d said she was leaving on the first train, so I’d left my house an hour ago and walked to Ajisai-san’s train station to catch her. “B-but I was sorta nervous to go on my own, so I was thinking, why don’t we go together?” I tried to force myself to laugh.

Ajisai-san froze and looked straight at me. *I guess this was a bad idea after all, huh?* I thought.

“Rena-chan,” she said.

Oh god. I was scared. I didn’t want to add extra responsibility to her plate, hence why I’d tried to create some levity. But maybe that hadn’t been the smartest move.

Well, I’d come here under the power of my own determination, for whatever that was worth. I was ready to take all the good and the bad and leave them all behind. Because Ajisai-san said she wanted to run away, and so I wanted to make that happen for her. After all, she was so kind and helpful to everyone, and that meant it would really, really suck if I made her stay with some logical argument like how much it’d make her family worry. I knew she wasn’t looking for a reward for her good behavior, but still—what good was a world that wouldn’t pay her back for that? So if the world wouldn’t help her get what she wanted, I would! I’d keep her safe so she wouldn’t get caught up in any nasty business, and then everything would turn out A-okay. Well, all right, a good half of this was just me being selfish and wanting to spend more time with Ajisai-san. But still…! Anyway, moving on.

Ajisai-san had been staring at the ground silently the whole time while I’d been talking. I thought maybe she was going to brush me off like, “Nope, sorry! You’re just in my way, so could you go home? I want to go enjoy my summer fling on my own!” completely devastating me in the process.

So I awaited her reaction anxiously. As she carried that bulging pack on her back, she—

—looked down at the ground with apologetic eyes, took my hand, and squeezed it.

“I’m so sorry, Rena-chan,” she said. “I must have made you worried. But…are you sure you wouldn’t mind coming with me?”

She looked up at me then with a look so attractive it would have made any person on Earth’s head spin. She wanted *me*. My cheeks were

on fire at once.

"O-of course!" I stammered out. "I mean, I was just killing time at home anyway! I'd absolutely much, much rather take a trip with you inste—"

Before I could finish my jabbering, she pulled me into a tight hug. Ajisai-san! Was! Hugging! Me! Oh my *god*!

I stopped breathing. My heart galloped as everything before my eyes became dazzlingly bright.

I could hear Ajisai-san's voice right next to my ear. "Thank you, Rena-chan," she said.

"S-sure thing…"

And thus, Ajisai-san and I boarded the first train of the day and set off on our journey to places unknown. There we were, two girls in our first year of high school, off to make this a summer to remember.

I'd taken everything out of my savings, but I still only had enough for two or three nights at a hotel. Was I up for the task of keeping Ajisai-san safe? Nah, it wasn't a question of whether I was or not. I *would* keep her safe, even if it cost me my life in the process! …Oh god, now this was too nerve-racking!

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story: Chapter 3
I've Wanted To Tell You This For Ages

THIS CHAPTER takes place at a point slightly further along in the narrative, on the train ride back to Tokyo.

Ajisai smiled as she watched Renako slump forward and nod off in the neighboring seat. *These last three days were so fun,* she thought, as Renako had shared every moment with her. The girls had played ping-pong and taken a bath together in a hot spring. Renako had been such a good listener that she found the courage to call her family, even though she feared they were angry with her, and have a heart-to-heart with them.

Mai showing up partway through had been quite the shock, but she only added to the fun. Everything, even their outfits, seemed so different as the girls walked around that seaside town that they might as well have been in a foreign county.

Ajisai felt all right now. *Thank you, Rena-chan,* she thought. *Thank you very much.* She stroked her head, appreciating the silky feel of Renako's hair under her fingers. She could never be grateful enough for Renako, Ajisai decided. She made a promise to herself that she'd try to make it up to her somehow, in whatever form that took.

Renako's breathing was slow and shallow in sleep as she leaned onto Ajisai's shoulder. Ajisai stiffened ever so slightly. She made to take Renako's hand before stopping partway through. Instead, she looked out the window at the landscape streaking by.

I swear, she thought, *that we'll be friends forever and ever more. My dear friend Renako, your happiness is my happiness, and I know that this feeling will never change. I don't want it to ever, ever change.*

As her lips traced the silent, beautiful promise, Ajisai likewise closed her eyes. The train ran on, carrying the two girls and their many, many new memories back to the city of their birth.

Chapter 2:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Take a Vacation Alone with Ajisai-san! Unless...

THE FIRST TIME I ever spoke to Ajisai-san was on the second day of high school. It had been raining, and when I, flush with my victory at having approached the awe-inspiring Mai the day before, saw Ajisai-san without an umbrella at the train station, I got so carried away that I went right up to her and said, "Hey, do you need some help? Want to walk with me to school?"

I pulled my folding umbrella out of my bag and flashed her a brilliant grin as I gave her what I hoped was that natural-seeming offer. (This is an artist's glorified rendition of that event.)

"Oh, are you sure?" she said. "That's so nice of you."

As she beamed at me in the downpour, I thought she looked exactly like a hydrangea glistening with raindrops. Then, she said, "Nice to meet you, Rena-chan," and she ended up sitting in front of me in class. Just like that, we were friends. Easy as pie.

From then on, Ajisai-san was the epitome of everything I admired. On the outside, she was delicate and adorable, and she was as kind and gentle as could be to anyone. Since I met her right at the start of school, I got freaked out that maybe everyone but me was this angelic. But that didn't turn out to be true. The closer I got to her, the more I realized how exceptional she was.

She was always coming to my rescue at school. When I got left without a partner for calisthenics in PE, she saw me standing there alone, stiff as a board, and came over. "Shoot, I don't have a partner," she said. "Want to be with me?" I just about cried at the offer and vowed to cherish this sweet girl for as long as I lived. With the sheer devotion I felt for her, it wouldn't have surprised me if I were Princess Ajisai's knight in a past life. There was no one like Ajisai-san anywhere else in the world. It was all thanks to her that I managed to overcome my junior high trauma. Hence, I decided to protect this flower through thick and thin.

And that's the backstory for how I found myself, filled with that

strong determination, seated next to her on the first train of the day.

"I've never taken a train this early before," she said. "It's really empty, huh?"

"You're telling me," I said.

Ajisai-san apparently had a place in mind she wanted to go to. First, we were taking the Keio line to Shinjuku, from which point we'd set off for our real destination.

"I have to admit," Ajisai-san said, showing me her phone as she clutched her bag, "I look up places to go on trips all the time whenever I don't have anything better to do."

One of her cute, sparkly pink nails pointed at the screen, which showed a whole list of hotels.

"I make plans for solo trips," she went on. "I use those apps to find transfers and plan out all sorts of crud. 'Hmm, this would take me two hours. What should I do to pass the time? Should I bring a book along?' You know?"

The way the word "crud" slipped out so casually made me think, *Ah, so I* can *say crud in front of her.* As an antisocial weirdo, I mostly picked up on what was appropriate to say by watching my more socially adept classmates.

"Uh, so how long will it take to get to where we're trying to go?" I asked.

"Hmm," she said. "It's about two and a half hours away."

"Oh, cool! Got it. That's like nothing when you're playing on your phone the whole time."

"Yeah, for sure," she said. "Plus, you're here too."

As we got farther away from home, Ajisai-san's smile naturally grew brighter. Wait. What if she was only pretending to be all hunky-dory to make me feel better? Oh, darn it. Here I was immediately anticipating the worst.

"It's such a new experience to ride the train when no one else is up yet," she said.

"Yeah, for real."

I'd just invited myself along under the pretext of ensuring her safety, shoving myself into her vacation with the declaration, "Running

away? Cool. When are you leaving? I'm coming too." (Call me Kakyoin, what with the way I was inviting myself along on her bizarre adventure.) But maybe Ajisai-san had simply wanted to enjoy a solo trip. She might have been excited about doing this or trying that on her own, meaning all my hard work was possibly for nothing. What was the point of all this if she walked away from it thinking, "Ew, I had to spend the whole time trying to entertain a loser who can't even take a hint. That was the literal worst"? If she hated me, that meant we wouldn't be together for the rest of high school!

But no, her safety was more important than anything else. If Ajisai-san made it home safe, then who cared if I spent the next three years all alone again…? Well, I did! The thought was inconceivable!

I shuddered. In order to fill in the small lull in our conversation, I hurried to say, "I-it's pretty nice and cool today, huh? Compared to yesterday and all."

"Yeah, it really is," she said.

For lack of any other idea, I'd defaulted to talking about the weather. Could I branch out, perhaps, to discussing the humidity or the different kinds of clouds? *No, cut it out!* I told myself. *That'd derail the conversation!*

Fortunately, unlike me, the train did *not* derail and instead made it safely to Shinjuku Station.

Once we got inside the station proper, I raised my hand and said, "H-hey, sorry, but I gotta make a quick bathroom break."

"Sure thing. It's fine; we still have time before our train comes in. You don't have to rush."

Once I split off from her, I fled to a stall in the women's bathroom and took a time out. "Oh my god," I groaned. I buried my face in my hands.

I didn't have the first clue about what to say to her. *Wait, let me take a second to get my thoughts sorted out.* What were the most essential things I had to do? Well, keep Ajisai-san safe, naturally. And I had to make sure she had fun too. In other words, my goal was to have her come away from the experience happy that I'd come along! Aha!

Well, then the rest was easy, right? All I needed to do was combine Mai's wealth of conversational know-how, Satsuki-san's brains,

and Kaho-chan's playfulness in order to entertain Ajisai-san. But could I do that?!

That was setting the goal way too high. Okay, I'd lower the bar a bit and make my objective just getting Ajisai-san home safe. There, that was the way to go. *It'll be fine,* I told myself. *Ajisai-san won't hate me… even if I have literally nothing to back this claim up with.*

At any rate, this wasn't like a video game. I didn't have a meter I could look at to see how Ajisai-san might be feeling or how much she was enjoying herself. If she smiled and said she was having fun, even if she was bored out of her mind, I wouldn't have had the foggiest idea. Well, it would have been hellish to actually have a mood meter, so maybe I was better off without one. Wait. What if it was actually the other way around? I mean, think about how nice Ajisai-san always was. If I didn't enjoy myself, she'd just think, "Oh no, Rena-chan forced herself to come along with me, and now she's upset." No, I couldn't bear the thought! Okay, I had to have a good time!

I chuckled weakly. I had Ajisai-san on a trip all to myself. How could I not be enjoying this? *Now c'mon, Renako, smile,* I thought. *You're sure to have a good time, right?*

I couldn't do it any longer! It was just too much for me to bear alone. I made up my mind and sent out an SOS signal from my phone. *Help! Please!* it read.

And then, even though it was still the crack of dawn, I got my response in no time at all.

Satsuki: What now? Are you being chased by zombies?

Oh, my friend Satsuki-san, coming in for the clutch like always! I giddily tapped away at the screen.

Renako: Satsuki-san! okay so I just ran off with Ajisai-san, but now I can't carry a conversation with her to save my life! please help!

Satsuki: I'm sorry, what?

Satsuki: There's too much to unpack here.

Renako: Ajisai-san said she was going to run away from home

alone so I tagged along, right? but now that means that she's going to be stuck with me for ages, and I don't have a clue what to do!

Satsuki: What on earth are you doing…?

Renako: idk! I'm literally just going along w/ this

She didn't respond for a few minutes, causing me to lose my mind. *Satsuki-san, you were my friend! Why? Why have you forsaken me?* I thought. *Could it be…you were never my friend at all? Oh, say it isn't so!* Was I the only one who thought we were friends? But we kissed three times! Oh, she didn't care about me at all… She'd only wanted me for my body… I figured that at that very moment, she'd already forgotten me and gone back to reading one of her pervy books.

I looked down at another contact on my phone: Oduka Mai. Could I talk to Mai? Could I tell her that I was currently in the middle of running off with Ajisai-san? But Mai was already so busy and all, so I didn't want to dump anything else on her plate. Besides…I remembered the day when Mai had made the urgent flight home from France and came after me. N-nope. Talking to her was out of the question. She might give me advice with a big ol' smile, but once it was all over, I knew she'd try to go to town on me. After all, that's what she did back when she heard about those kisses with Satsuki-san.

Maybe I could ask Kaho-chan for advice, then. Kaho-chan would hear me out…I thought. I wasn't sure. I actually knew nothing about her personal life.

Oh, it was no use. I was screwed. *Oh god,* I asked, *is it a sin in and of itself for a talentless woman like me to try to help Ajisai-san?* If I had no wings, how could I reach out to an angel? I would simply have to face Ajisai-san naked and bereft as I was.

And just as I was resigning myself to my fate, a message from Satsuki-san arrived.

Huh? Wait—huh, huh, huh? As I stared in blank amazement, four text files popped up too.

Renako: what're those?

Satsuki: They're files for you to open whenever you're in a sticky social situation.

Satsuki: I've written conversation topics on them.

Satsuki: Please, use them when you're in need.

Renako: thank you, Satsuki-san! oh, there's nothing like friendship

Renako: I'm super touched

Renako: tysm! you're the best, Satsuki-san. I love you! oh man, you have me beat six ways to sunday. you're my *very best friend* in the whole wide world! cause you (ooh ooh, ooh ooh) you make my dreams come true (ooh ooh, ooh ooh)

Satsuki: Shut up.

Renako: okay, I'm going to crack open that first one now!

Satsuki: You're way too desperate.

I opened up one of the four files and found this conversation starter: *Ask about where she'd like to go someday.* Ooh. That was more average than I'd expected. This was Satsuki-san we were talking about, so I expected it to be, like, "Say, what are your favorite torture techniques across the globe? I myself"—and here she'd let out a little giggle—"am partial to the ancient Chinese technique of forcing a criminal to walk over a raging bonfire on a pipe slathered in oil."

Actually, I'm more grateful it was average. Average worked for me. If anything, average was best. After all, I wanted to *be* average if that was at all possible for me. Hooray for (underhanded ways of achieving) averageness!

Satsuki: But I must warn you about one thing.

Renako: huh, what? this sounds kinda spooky…

Satsuki: You seem to adore Sena, but you must remember that all people are inherently evil. If you were to strip off her outer layer, even she would reveal an ugly side.

Renako: huh? no way! Ajisai-san's an angel, not a mean and selfish person like we are!

Satsuki: Am I included in this "we"?

Renako: … :)

Satsuki: Well, no matter. My point is, you might change your tune when you see parts of her you don't like or parts you'd rather not see.

Renako: but I love every part of Ajisai-san, of course

Satsuki: It's impossible to love everything about someone.

Wow, talk about an assertion.

Satsuki: That's why I'm asking you to look beyond the version of her you've made up in your head. See her for who she truly is, all right?

Renako: uh…yeah, got it

Satsuki: That's all I had to say. Now, good luck.

And that was the end of the conversation.

My takeaway from what Satsuki-san had been trying to say was that I shouldn't force my ideals on her, but…

Oddly enough, that "It's impossible to love everything about someone" line resonated. Sure, even Mai and Satsuki-san had their various flaws, as was only natural… Then, did that mean that Ajisai-san had hers too? Was it only that my socialization skills were too poor for me to see them?

No, I couldn't sit here fussing about this. Ajisai-san was waiting for me, so I had to go.

I speed-walked out of the bathroom to find an incredibly gorgeous girl standing next to a pillar right outside. Oh god, she was adorable! And she was Ajisai-san. *You're so cute!* I thought.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting, Ajisai-san," I said.

"Oh, no, don't worry about it."

A wave of euphoria washed over me when she smiled. Yeah, Ajisai-san couldn't have any bad points at all! That was all just Satsuki-san being a big ol' worrywart. Ajisai-san was perfect, exquisite—a supreme angel!

And now, with my conversation starters in tow, I was no longer afraid. What did I have to fear, when such a glorious vision stood next

to me? How could I feel defeated when I had Ajisai-san at my side? Please. As if I could ever lack such devotion!

"Ready to go?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, um. Uh."

Oh god, she was walking away from me already. But my conversation topics! My poor, poor conversation topics.

I'd just flubbed up the timing to strike up a casual conversation here in Shinjuku Station, even though I had a whole list of topics right with me! *Satsuki-san,* I thought, *these are no use if you don't tell me when to bring up these topics!*

As Ajisai-san marched away faster than normal, motivation in every step, I trailed along behind her like a duckling. I didn't even know where we were going in the first place.

We passed through the ticket gate and went up and down some flights of stairs before finally walking down a narrow corridor and arriving at the platform for the Odakyu line.

When I finally caught up to her, I said, "Um, can I ask where we're going?"

She grinned at me like a mischievous child as she stood behind the white line. With a look like that, I figured she was about to say "Rena-chan, I'm going to take you away to a world where there's no one but us" and usher me aboard a train ride to heaven. And if she had, I'd have just been like, "Well, it's Ajisai-san who's doing the offering. Why not?"

But I was a little off, apparently.

"Here's a question for you, Rena-chan," she said.

"Huh? Oh, uh, okay."

Welcome to the first ever Ajisai Quiz Bowl, I thought. If I got the right answer, would that raise her affection points with me?

"Where do you think I've wanted to go for ages and ages now?" she asked.

"Huh? Um, let's see…" I said. "Disneyland?"

"Bzzzt. Okay, let me give you a hint. It's somewhere super calming."

“Somewhere super calming…” I repeated. “Wait, could it be Kyoto? You know, like with temple tours and what not.”

“Bzzzzzzzzt. Time for me to reveal the correct answer!”

Looks like my time had run out while I was making all those wrong guesses. The train was approaching, and when the door opened, Ajisai-san practically danced into it. Then she spun around, her skirt whirling, and announced, “We’re going to a hot spring, Rena-chan.”

The offensive power in that sentence was so strong I was reminded of those skilled online players who never show up to IRL tournaments. As my brain rebooted, my eyes popped wide open.

“A hot spring?!” I cried.

“Uh-huh. I already reserved seats for us, so c’mon. Let’s go sit down.”

“Oh my god.”

I was frozen stiff as a statue, so she took me by the hand and led me through the train car.

The train was bound for uncharted territory (for me personally) where Ajisai-san’s coveted hot spring lay. Wow. Was I legit going to a hot spring with her? Had I seriously stumbled into this opportunity? I hadn’t been prepared for this in the slightest. I guess this was what people called getting swept off their feet.

Still dazed, I made it to my reserved seat, which was right next to hers. Ajisai-san put her backpack down with a small grunt and then gestured to the seat with a grin.

“Help yourself, Renako,” she said.

“O-okay.”

I stayed standing for a moment. I couldn’t believe I’d made it this far just like that, and the full implications of the powerful, powerful phrase “I’m running off with Ajisai-san” had really sunk in. This express train was now taking us far, far from the city. The cliché phrase “If I am to turn back, I need to do it now before it’s too late” came to mind.

“Rena-chan?” Ajisai-san asked, tilting her head.

It almost felt like she was asking me to come with her to heaven. *No, stop that! You’re a coward if you’re getting cold feet this late in the game. Get it together, Renako!* I told myself. *Remember everything Ajisai-*

san's done for you. It's time to return the favor! If there was anything I could do to help (and even if there wasn't), I couldn't let Ajisai-san go off on her own like this!

As she smiled and offered me the window seat, I took her shoulder. "Huh?" she said. Then I plopped her down in that very same seat.

"It's your day today, after all," I told her. I looked away as I did, kind of embarrassed. I wasn't trying to be all cool; it was just…me showing her how determined I felt, you know?

Ajisai-san looked startled for a moment before a smile spread across her face like a flower going into bloom.

"Thank you, Rena-chan," she said.

God, she was *so* cute.

"N-nah, don't mention it."

I took my backpack off and set it at my feet, pulling out my phone charger and other odds and ends in the process. I pretended to busy myself with that so she wouldn't see how red my face was getting.

Ajisai-san giggled as she looked out the window. "It's been such a long time since I've had a window seat," she said. "Whenever we go anywhere on trips, the kiddos always snatch them up. Honestly, I think I really might have been missing this."

I couldn't tell if she was talking to me or to herself. As I stole a peek at her, she looked back and met my eyes.

"Say, what do you think, Rena-chan?" she asked.

I didn't have the faintest idea what would be appropriate to say, so I gave her a stupidly honest answer. "Um… I don't know."

Ajisai-san didn't seem taken aback by that. She just grinned gently at me. "Okay."

"Yeah…"

The train started up, and for a time, Ajisai-san just sat there watching the scenery pass by without talking to me. Oh, right. I had conversation topics. It'd be fine. I could do this. Satsuki-san had my back, after all.

"H-hey, can I ask you something?" I said.

“Hmm?”

“If you could go anywhere, Ajisai-san, where would you want to go?”

“What a question. Does it have to be real? Like, could I say Wonderland or something?”

“Uh, I don’t know…”

“You don’t know?!” she exclaimed.

I mean, there hadn’t been any rules in the text file…

“Hmmm,” she said. “Well, I think I’d like to see one of those European castles or something. You know, like Neuschwanstein Castle or Windsor Castle.”

“Oh, yeah, castles rock! They’re full of treasure chests and everything.”

Hey, Satsuki-san! This isn’t going well at all! I thought. She hadn’t factored in how terrible I was at making appropriate replies. My only experience with castles came from RPGs!

As if she realized just how distressed I was, Ajisai-san kept the conversational ball rolling and said, “Oh yeah, and I was thinking I’d like to try going to this one thing some time… What’s it called? Comiket? I think that’s it.”

“You mean the Comic Market fan convention?!”

“Yeah, that’s the one!” she said with a grin.

I was just a gamer, so I didn’t know a ton about anime and manga and stuff. Sure, I was a fan of some series, but they weren’t really my main thing, more like just minor interests. But if Ajisai-san was an anime fan, then sign me up. I wanted to have something to talk about with her one-on-one!

I had never suspected that Satsuki-san’s conversational topics could make me feel this way. *Thank you, Satsuki-san,* I thought. *There really is nothing like friendship. BFFs for life!*

I leaned forward, feigning a sudden interest in the topic but also taking caution to not appear overeager. “Say, if you want to go to Comiket,” I suggested, “then there must be something there that really appeals to you, right?”

I anxiously waited for her response.

Bashfully, she admitted, “Yeah. I see on the news that a ton of cosplayers go there. They’re so cute, so I’d like to see them in person.”

“Oh, okay!”

Oh no. It was a perfect trap: the trap used to lure people over to the dark side of otakudom! Okay, no. Maybe I was just being paranoid. I was sure that even if I was an otaku, Ajisai-san would still readily accept me with a grin.

“I’m busy this year, so I don’t think it’ll work out,” she said. “But I’d really like to go someday.”

Speaking of cosplay…

“By the way,” I said, “I’d love to see you cosplay sometime.”

“Huh?” She clapped her hands to her cheeks shyly. God, she was cute!

“But cosplay’s for people who are into that kind of media,” she said. “Oh, but I would like to dress up as some of the magical girls from the Sunday morning kid shows. They’re super cute.”

Aha. So Ajisai-san watched those superhero shows like Sentai Whatever or Kamen Rider with her little brothers. And that meant she also watched the magical girl shows that aired right after.

Ajisai-san cosplaying as a magical girl would have been out-of-this-world adorable. I was dying to see her in one of those frilly skirts and all. Hoo boy, that’d be something all right.

“There’s this one character who’s my favorite,” she said. “She’s a new girl who came in partway through…”

She ended up telling me about the show all the rest of the way. It was well worth running away with her just to hear her go on about little-kid anime. Hearing a cute girl talk about such a cute topic was altogether too precious. This little corner of this train speeding away from the city was the gentlest, kindest place on earth. Man, traveling with Ajisai-san was the legit best!

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“Rena-chan, we’re almost there,” Ajisai-san said.

“Wha?” I spluttered.

I must have dozed off at some point. I mean, I’d barely slept the night before, so shocker, right?

I rubbed the back of my mouth free from drool. “S-sorry, Ajisai-san.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I slipped off for a minute there too.” She grinned bashfully.

Keeping my cool after waking up to the sight of Ajisai-san’s face was just impossible.

We picked up our backpacks and got off the train. The area around the station was almost deserted. The ticket booth had kind of a retro feel going on too, and it really didn’t give off all that strong of a seaside-tourist-trap vibe. Overall, it was kinda…

“It’s kinda deserted out here, huh?” she said.

“Huh?! Are you allowed to say that?” I asked her.

She laughed. “Well, that’s what it looks like.”

I mean, she had a point. But I thought this was where she had wanted to go.

A salty sea breeze blew through the town, reminding me of my recent trip to Odaiba. Back then, it’d been Mai standing next to me, but now I was here with Ajisai-san at my side. She absentmindedly patted down her hair, hefted her large backpack, and looked off into the distance. I wanted to watch her silently, but I thought I’d look like a creep if I just stood around staring at her forever.

So I said, “Uh, is this the place you wanted to stay at?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I was thinking about spending the night at the hot spring here.”

“Gotcha.”

She peered at the clock tower in the station square. “It’s almost lunchtime, and I’m getting hungry—aren’t you? Let’s go pop into one of the shops.”

“Sounds good to me!”

We weren’t exactly spoiled for choice, so we decided to try the lone udon shop directly in front of the station. The place only had a

handful of customers, and we sat next to each other at the counter. I was suddenly hyper aware of her slender shoulders right next to mine and tried with all my might to keep my heart in check.

"Uh, hey, Ajisai-san," I said. "Are you a big udon fan?"

"Yeah, it's tasty. I like noodles in general, but I'm not into going to udon shops on my own."

"Yeah, I feel you there," I said.

But I really didn't. I was one of those people who was totally chill with eating alone.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw Satsuki-san glaring at me. "Why are you lying to her?" mental Satsuki-san asked me. "Didn't we talk about this before?"

This is a different situation! I pleaded with her. *I was just agreeing with her on autopilot. I didn't mean anything by it, I swear!*

I rushed to correct my error. "Uh, actually! I might be known to eat alone at ramen shops once or twice myself!"

If Ajisai-san had glared at me and gone, "Why'd you lie?" I would have burst into tears right on the spot. But she didn't.

"Wow, that's impressive," she said. "With you around, I bet I could go anywhere, huh?"

I detected a hint of an indirect insult (like, "You go everywhere alone? You must have no friends LOL"), but as this was Ajisai-san speaking, I knew she didn't mean it that way.

"Uh-huh!" I said.

The udon we'd ordered arrived: cold kake udon for me and warm kitsune udon for her. Ajisai pulled a scrunchie out of her bag and tied her hair up in one fluid motion. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of her bare neck.

"G-guess I'd better dig in," I gulped.

"Me too!"

Look, I wasn't being a creep or anything. Literally everyone thinks that girls putting up their hair to avoid dragging it in their noodles is a beautiful, beautiful thing. Everyone thinks that, I tell you!

"This is great," she said.

“S-sure is.”

We were navigating dangerous waters here. Wanting to be the noodles Ajisai-san was currently blowing on was completely crossing the line. I saw her eating food at school all the time, but for some reason, eating out with her made my stomach flip-flop. It was probably because it was drawing dangerously close to the sentiment of sharing our daily bread together. Standing around eating crepes or sipping tea was a whole other story. I couldn’t put my finger on what, but something about sharing food with a friend as part of the normal daily routine embarrassed the heck out of me.

I snuck a glance at her and happened to meet her eyes. *Eep*.

Ajisai-san giggled. “You want a bite?” she asked.

“N-no thanks. I was just, um, looking at you for some reason. Sorry.”

“What’re you apologizing for? Don’t be weird.”

I chuckled lamely. Darn it! I was turning into a bigger creep with every passing minute! I’d wanted to say something more wholesome, for crying out loud, but what in the world would that even be?

Time to dive into Satsuki’s second file, I thought. Was it a bad idea to use up half of them within the first couple hours of the first leg? Yeah, for sure!

At any rate, the second file said, *Ask about her dreams for the future.*

Satsuki-san had done it again. You couldn’t get more wholesome than that. Nothing about it made me sound like a creep, and it wasn’t overly familiar at all. Satsuki-san didn’t seem to be all that into the whole talking thing, but she knew just the thing I needed at the time I needed it. Sounds like she was the girl I needed too! I could just turn my brain off and let her text files do the talking.

Like a radio-controlled robot, I asked, “Ajisai-san, do you have any dreams for the future?”

“Hmm, let’s see. What sort of dreams do I have?” Ajisai-san gave me a puzzled grin, her chopsticks still moving all the while. “That’s kind of a hard question, don’t you think?”

Felt that!

“What about you?” she asked.

“Me…? I guess I do.”

If at all possible, I wanted to live in solitude, never work a day in my life or speak to a soul, and then die a hermit. But I deleted that thought when it came up on reflex. That would have been a major turnoff for Ajisai-san.

“I-I used to think it’d be nice to support myself off of playing video games,” I said. “You know, like those big streamers…” I laughed weakly.

“Ooh, that sounds fun,” she said. “How nice.” She smiled at me in full approval.

Had I been a bit more naive, I would have been dangerously close to thinking, “Sh-she just approved of my dream. All right! Time for me to become the best streamer in the world and make her my wife!”

“But now I don’t feel that way,” I said. “There’s all kinds of stuff I’d like to do, although whether or not I can pull any of them off is a different story.”

“I see,” she said. “That all sounds really great to me. It’s fun to hear about people’s dreams, don’t you think?”

She beamed right at me. I could hear the sound of her affection meter rising. *Mwa ha ha!*

“I used to want to work in a bakery when I was little,” she said. “Then I wanted to be a grown-up oneesan.”

“Wh-what’s a grown-up oneesan?” I asked.

“Yeah, good question, right? I just pictured walking around looking all cool, although I don’t know what I’d actually do for a living. I thought of it like striding through town in a suit and high heels.”

She must have been pretty young when she came up with that one. My heart sang when I imagined an even more grown-up version of Ajisai-san jauntily dashing about. Oh, Ajisai-oneechan!

“But to be honest,” she admitted, “I don’t think my dream’s really changed all that much since.”

She sighed as she held the udon bowl in her hands. “You know, every now and then I wish I could be a bit more mature than I am now. I wish I could be kinder to people, actually have real courage, and have

the ability to pull off anything."

"Is that what you were talking about on our phone call the other day?"

"Uh-huh. That's my goal for now, at any rate, but I think I've got quite a ways to go before I meet it…"

From where I stood, Ajisai-san looked perfect. But even she could recognize that she had room for growth and worked so hard every day to make that growth happen.

She laughed it off. "Oh well! It hasn't worked out one bit. Here I am, nagging my brothers, getting fed up, and running away."

"W-we all have times like that," I said. "We can't always give it our best."

"You're so sweet, Rena-chan. Thanks for cheering me up, even if I am a piece of work."

Her smile looked faint, as if any minute it was about to disappear altogether. But why? Wait, hold on!

"No, that's not at all true!" I said. "Come on, I'm no good either! You're always complimenting me for all kinds of things, but I still have a lot of room for improvement. I get burnt out at the drop of the hat, so whenever I need to take a break, I do. When I can't give it my 100 percent, I give lazing about my 100 percent!"

I had zero faith in myself, because I knew that when it came down to the final moment, I wasn't going to suddenly start showing backbone. I was more liable to cut and run instead!

"I'm glad you know how to pace yourself, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said. "That's wonderful."

That's not what I meant at all!

"Come on, sometimes I spend the entire day lying in bed!" I protested.

"It's important to rest up when you can."

"Well, how about when I play video games and procrastinate on my homework?"

"It's nice that you can be so passionate about something," Ajisai-san said. "I wish I could."

I'd just been beating myself up, but courtesy of Ajisai-san's low self-esteem, she kept turning that back around and paying me compliments. For this one moment only, I adored seeing her so Ajisad. But if she carried this on any longer, I would just about explode from guilt. I had to get her to stop, and fast.

"Please, Ajisai-san," I begged. "Could you please insult me?"

Her eyes widened. "What kind of request is that?! Well, um…what would you like me to say?"

"Try telling me whatever you secretly think about me on a daily basis."

"Huh? Oh god."

Ajisai-san stared straight at me like she was trying to bring something to mind. My heartbeat galloped, and a bead of uneasy sweat trickled down my back. I'd never heard her badmouth anyone before, so I wondered what she would say to me. Maybe she'd say something cute like, "You're a big dum-dum, a nitwit!" Or maybe she'd cut me to the core with, "Boy, you sure don't know how to talk whenever you've got more than two people in a conversation, huh?"

As I sat there, bizarrely nervous, Ajisai-san half closed her eyes and muttered, "Rena-chan, you're so…so…nice to everyone."

When those words escaped the angel of Ashigaya High's lips, I couldn't help but yell, "Wait, *you're* the one saying that?"

After we wrapped up our meal, we left the shop and walked into town. It was your pretty typical seaside town, and even though I'd never been there before, the whole scene made me feel nostalgic.

Ajisai-san walked ahead of me. At first glance, she looked like she was being her usual self, but…something was off. That lunch convo had confirmed it, and whatever it was must have been a big deal if she kept beating herself up like that. Plus, every few minutes, she'd start staring at the ground.

I wanted to cheer her up, but that wasn't really going all that well. Maybe if I'd gotten my act together back during junior high, I'd have enough life experience to make her feel better.

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks and looked off across a levee. The sun glittered white in the hot summer sun, stretching so wide it

filled my entire field of vision. It was almost outrageously enormous.

I stepped up closer to stand next to her.

"I used to come here a bunch, you know," she told me. "My relatives run a bed-and-breakfast here."

"Oh, cool."

So it hadn't just been some random town after all.

"Uh-huh," she went on. "I feel like it's kind of a backwater. But maybe that's just because I'm a real Tokyo girl, you know? I don't mind this quieter vibe."

The two of us walked on, side by side, each carrying our own big backpacks. Just then, it hit me where we were going: to that bed-and-breakfast her relatives owned.

"I'm always thinking I'd like to go someplace, checking out travel sites and what not," she said. "But once I decided to run away, this was the first place that came to mind."

She looked down at the ground. "I guess, in the end, I figured I couldn't go anywhere unless I'd already been there before."

Something about her looked so, so horribly sad, like a little girl too afraid of the water to jump into the pool. As the seconds ticked by, I realized with increasing clarity just what it was I had to do…

All right then. If it was something this small, then even I could handle it!

I grabbed her hand.

She squeaked. "R-Rena-chan?"

"Hey, Ajisai-san! I saw another inn that's around here too!" I showed her my phone and grinned at her. "I mean, I'm cool with going somewhere you've been before, but don't you want to try going somewhere else since we're together? Yeah, this might end up being a huge mistake, but…we'll cross that bridge when we get to it!"

She stared back at me, in shock at my own recklessness. I sweated, unsure of whether or not I'd gone too far. I really, really didn't want her to be like, "Uh, no, it's not like that."

To fill in the silence, I kept babbling on and making a fool of myself, my voice rising into a shout. "Don't worry! Ajisai-san, you can go anywhere and do anything alone. If you're nervous about being

alone, don't be—because I'm here for you!"

No one was around in that lonely little seaside town as I took her by the hand. I hadn't planned on grabbing her hand, but that was what Ajisai-san always did when she wanted to get through to other people.

The space between her eyebrows crinkled. "Rena-chan…" she said.

"Uh, y-yeah. That's what I was thinking, so. Um."

"Is that the inn you're talking about?"

"Huh?"

Ajisai-san pointed, and I looked, only to see…

"Th-that place is falling apart!"

And there on the door was a sign with the words "Closed for Business." Oh my god! What was I to do now?

I was so mortified I broke out into a hideous sweat. I felt like I was going to crumble away and collapse on the spot. *Yeah, I'm sure you're dealing with your own issues right now, but at least update your website, dammit!* I thought.

Ajisai-san giggled and then said in an almost-whisper. "Then how about…we go to the next station down the line, Rena-chan?"

"Oh, uh, okay!" I said, agreeing for dear life. "Sure, sounds good to me!"

There she went helping me out to make me feel better again. *Thank you, thank you, Ajisai-san…* God, I really wasn't fit to play Mai's role.

Then, in a tiny little voice, Ajisai-san muttered, "…Thanks."

"Huh? Uh, what?"

My cheeks were red with embarrassment and I couldn't turn to look at her, so I just walked forward, my hand still in hers. We retraced our steps back to the station, still hand-in-hand for some unknown reason. Her palm felt much, much warmer than that moment when she'd held it walking through the station earlier.

Now might be a good time to mention that the next train wasn't coming for another forty minutes. We really weren't in Tokyo anymore, Toto!

***

We went on from Ajisai-san's familiar seaside town to another one that was less familiar to us, where we stopped in at the town's single inn. When we went up to the front desk—which put me in mind of some kind of bathhouse—the place looked deserted. I figured we were the only prospective guests at the moment.

"This didn't even cross my mind until now," she said, "but I wonder if they'll even let a couple of high schoolers rent rooms overnight."

True, I'd heard stories of people needing their parents' written permission and whatnot to make it work. But it was a bit late for that now.

As I fretted, Ajisai-san grinned. "Let's go and ask."

She trotted right over to the desk, calling, "Excuse me!" as she went. Those who could use that special skill, "Let's go and ask" were so strong. I was utterly dependent on them. Ajisai-san really was incredible, for this was no mean feat.

To make a long story short, they let us stay the night totally normally and everything. I guess Ajisai-san didn't make the old lady working the front desk suspicious. The old gal didn't even ask what we were doing here. Well, that was because Ajisai-san was doing the talking, right? She was fantastic and had cheat codes for every social interaction. Why, I bet she'd go through her whole life without ever getting questioned by the police. I hoped she'd continue to bloom and receive nothing but societal favor forevermore.

Ajisai-san came running back to me with a smile and the room key.

"Rena-chan, she said they have a room free," she told me. "Thank goodness!"

"Y-yeah, for real."

Then the old lady (I guess she was the innkeeper?) popped up and began bombarding Ajisai-san with conversation. "Is this your friend? Oh, you're traveling together? Why, how lovely. Now, we don't have a lot going on around these parts, so you girls just relax and enjoy

yourselves. Oh, but there is the festival tomorrow! This area's famous for it, so do be sure to check it out." She just went on and on and on, rattling off her words like a machine gun.

I didn't know how to get a word in edgewise around such a chatty stranger, but Ajisai-san responded as easily as if she were catching up with a neighbor she spoke to constantly. It was out of this world.

We walked down a long hallway as the old lady led us to our room, gabbling away all the while.

Ooh, I thought when we arrived. This room was actually legit. (I mean, that might be kind of rude to say, but whatever.) It was about the size of my living room back home and done up in a traditional Japanese style. There was a big table and four legless chairs for sitting on the tatami. With even a TV and a little fridge, it was a nice, normal inn room, with a space in the adjoining room for us to spread out our futons. Considering that we'd walked into this thinking, "Eh, who cares if it sucks?" it was actually pretty decent. Plus, it was where I'd be spending a couple of days sharing Ajisai-san's daily routine, right? And that, I tell you, was way too persuasive of an argument.

"Holler if you need anything, Ajisai-chan!" the old lady chirped.

"Will do, thanks!" Ajisai-san said back.

The old lady, who had apparently become fast friends with Ajisai-san in the span of a few minutes, bowed and shut the door behind her with a click, leaving Ajisai-san and I alone together.

She sat her backpack down and smiled in contentment. "What a treat to have this room all to ourselves," she said.

"Y-yeah, absolutely."

I put my bag down in the corner too, turned on the A/C, and sat down. *Whew.* For now, I think I wanted to just take a breather.

Ajisai-san looked like she was having the time of her life as she explored the room. "Ooh," she said. "This is such a nice place."

God, she was so cute. Watching her walk around was infinitely healing. I wished this place had cameras to put up a 24-hour stream of her.

As she opened the doors to the walk-in closet, she squealed like she'd just found treasure. "Hey, they have yukatas! Let's put them on, Rena-chan."

“Uh, sure,” I said. To be fair, we’d been running around outside all morning, so I was dripping with sweat. Being the recluse I was, I felt relieved to have returned to a sort of home base, and so I dropped my guard and agreed with her. Yet little did I know the true fearsomeness of the yukata.

I went to stand next to her, and as she took up an ordinary-looking inn yukata, a burst of electric current ran through my mind. Wait, Ajisai-san? In a yukata?! Whoa there. Hold the phone. Slow down. Was this allowed?

“Oh goody,” she said. “These look so nice and cool.”

She looked like she was about to change right then and there, which left me in a predicament.

I turned away. “Um,” I said. “Uh. *Um.*”

“Oh, whoops. Sorry. I’ll step into the other room and change, okay?”

Considerately, she took the yukata and zoomed into the other room. As she slowly closed the door behind her, I noticed something—she was *grinning*.

“Rena-chan,” she said. “No peeking, m’kay?”

I made a bizarre squawking sound like a weird bird, and Ajisai-san cackled as she closed the door behind her fully.

She was changing her clothes in the next room… She was taking off her shirt, taking off her skirt, and pulling on the yukata… Sure, we’d changed around each other in PE, but there were always other girls there. That was a big, noisy affair, with all of us gabbing away, nothing like this quiet, gentle mood. If I strained my ears, I thought I could hear the faint rustle of her clothes over the rumbling of the A/C.

I scrambled to change too. Maybe I couldn’t hear her after all. Maybe all I heard was the beating of my own heart!

I pulled on the soft fabric over my camisole and then tied the obi—the sash—around my waist. Man, how many years had it been since I’d worn a yukata? It felt pretty tight, and it made me stand up straighter. I wasn’t sure if it looked weird, and even when I went to go check in the bathroom mirror, I still couldn’t quite figure out if I had it on right or not… In the end, I think it was just a matter of it emphasizing my chest more than I was used to.

At any rate, there didn't seem to be anything too *special* about it, what with my hair being the same and all. What if I tried messing with it a bit? Nah, it'd be better to keep my hands off my hair if I didn't know what I was doing.

Just then, the sliding door opened behind me, signaling that Ajisai-san was done.

"Thanks for waiting!" she said.

"Yeah, no prob."

I tiptoed back to the room, and there I found the quintessence of Japanese beauty standing before me.

The quintessence giggled. "I love how it feels!"

"Oh my god," I groaned.

Holy shit. Ajisai-san was standing there wearing a yukata. She had her hair pulled up in a simple ponytail with a nylon scrunchie, exposing the nape of her neck. This was dangerous business. I mean, the sexiness was off the charts. The glimpse of her bare feet peeking out of the yukata, which went down all the way to her ankles, was more dazzling than the ocean was before. Perhaps it was just the fabric of that darn yukata, but Ajisai-san, who was already heavenly to begin with, looked even more gentle and graceful. Her shoulders… Oh, they were so slender… And oh, the line from her neck to her shoulders in that yukata… No doubt about it, this had to be my fetish!

“You look so nice in your yukata,” she told me with a giggle. “We’re twinsies.”

“Yeah!”

I felt like I had the words *Hot damn!* written above my head in neon lights. Oh god, every time she walked, her yukata twitched from side to side, and I could see… I could see… Hoo boy! If only I could take the fabric at the neckline and weld it shut!

Would Ajisai-san and I really be living under the same roof in yukatas? It was almost like we were husband and wife. *No, no, no.* I’d only barely just changed, and now here I was sweating again.

“Now I’m really getting that whole inn feel. Know what I mean?” she asked.

“Boy, do I ever!” I said.

I took a deep breath. *Come on, let’s calm down now,* I told myself. Ajisai-san obviously wouldn’t want to share a room with another girl who kept ogling her lustfully. Wait a second—no, I wasn’t! *What nonsense are you talking about, Renako?* I about scared the living daylights out of myself there. *Me*, ogle Ajisai-san? With impure thoughts? Pssh. Not even once. Phew, I’d given myself quite the fright.

Well, to be fair, others did look at her like that every so often. My friend group (sans me) tended to come up in conversations a lot, especially in those “Hey, so who’s the hottest girl in the class?” kind of conversations. Of course, not all the boys were model gentlemen, so you’d hear them say stuff like, “Mai’s the way to go. I’d hook up with her,” or “Nah, nah, nah, it’s gotta be Sena, right?” Those kinds of conversations only ever happened when the object of interest wasn’t around, and whenever I heard them, I always felt like telling the guys off. But was I on the same level right now? Great, that meant that I was mentally a teenage boy.

Bah, and now I was depressed again. *Okay, listen up, me,* I chastised myself. Ajisai-san was an angel, and even if that darn Mai had skewed my preferences *ever so slightly*, there was no way in hell I’d look at her that way. Ajisai-san was the last ray of light beaming down on this filthy world.

That very same light now sat across from me, flipping through one of those tour guide thingies they have in inns. (Apparently, they’re

called information books.)

"Wow," she said. "It says there's a private, detached hot spring here that we can make a reservation for. Let's call and ask later."

"S-sure, sounds good," I said.

A hot spring… A private hot spring…?

"Uh, hey," I said.

"Hmm?"

I put my hand to my chin, thoughtful. "So you mean, like, you and I being in the same hot spring together?"

"You know it," said Ajisai-san.

I couldn't afford to misunderstand her here. As carefully as if I was pulling out a Jenga block, I asked again, "So, like, you and I being in the same hot spring together…which means, in other words, you and I being in the same hot spring together?"

"Uh. Yes," she said.

Okay, no. That was just…a bad idea! Right?! I mean, of *course* I had never, not once in the whole history of the universe, given Ajisai-san the googly eyes, and I had also bathed with Mai and Satsuki-san before, but… Bathing with Ajisai-san was a terrible idea, you know?! I had an awful feeling about it. Nay, I said. Nay, nay!

"Uh, s-sorry," I said. "I think I might pass on the hot spring myself."

"Oh, really?"

"Y-yeah! I mean, I'm not super comfy with people looking at me and all. I swear it has nothing to do with you. I mean it—it really, really doesn't!"

"O-okay," she said.

As I raised as much of a stink as a wet cat would, Ajisai-san looked somewhat put out. But she said, "I just thought it'd be nice to try together," and left it at that.

As a weirdo loser, making people look put out was my forte. For the first time in my life, my experience in making hundreds and hundreds of people look put out was finally coming in handy! God, this sucked.

But at the same time, what a relief. If she'd tried snuggling up to me and been all, "Aww, you don't wanna try the hot spring with me?" I would have been entirely out of luck. Heh! Never mind that Mai and Satsuki-san had pulled me into the bath with unstoppable force (emphasis on the unstoppable), I refused to bathe with Ajisai-san too!

Meanwhile, as she flipped through more of the info book, she said, "Oh, it says there's a ping-pong table here too. Do you know how to play, Rena-chan?"

"I'm okay at it."

"I'd love to go a round with you."

"J-just be gentle," I said.

Ajisai-san went silent. Up until now, she'd been chipper as could be, but now she suddenly clammed up and scooted over to me. Uh, hello? What was all this about?

Still clad in her inn yukata, Ajisai-san was right next to me. The roundness of the cloth around her legs occupied my full attention, and my heart skipped a beat.

She cleared her throat with a little cough.

"Um, hey, Rena-chan," she said. "I have something important to say to you."

"Uh, okay."

Huh? What on earth could it be? What was I supposed to do if she said that she never wanted to go back home and that she wanted to live and work here at the inn for the rest of her life? Should I support her in that endeavor? But come on, I'd hate that. I'd miss her. I wanted her to come back to school with me.

As I trembled in fear, Ajisai-san said, "I know we've not really talked about this, but it's the *money issue*."

"Huh?" I said. I hadn't expected her to bring up money, of all things.

She pulled a long, pink enamel wallet from her backpack. "So you were nice enough to come with me on this running away from home thing, right?"

"Yeah? I mean, I guess, so… Yeah?"

I didn't get what she was driving at, so I nodded along. The issue

was in what came after.

"So I've been thinking that I'd like to *pay for everything*. The inn costs and the transportation fees both, I mean. Oh, and I'll take care of lunch too."

I just about jumped out of my skin. "No way!" I said. "Nooooo way." I couldn't have that! "Ajisai-san, I came along because I wanted to!"

"Uh-huh," she said. "And I appreciate the sentiment. I mean it. I'm really grateful to you."

She smiled at me, but her eyebrows bunched together in concern. "But I mean, I'm the one who started this. I'm glad you came with me, but I'd feel bad if I let you do anything else for me. Sorry, I know I've made this kind of awkward."

"No, no, it's fine," I protested. "I can pay for my share, at least…"

"I'd just be forcing you to spend all your money," she said. "And this inn's not cheap for a couple of high schoolers, you know?"

My ears started ringing. As much as I wanted to be a yes-man, I absolutely had to tell her no.

Even as the internal paradox agonized me, I somehow forced myself to make the compelling argument, "N-no, I can't let you… Come on, when we go out as a group and someone suggests we pop in at a place, we don't force them to pay for all of us, you know? It's only common sense for us to split the bill, right? Right? Besides, I only ever waste my savings on mobile games or buying other video games anyway. And I've always wanted to go with you on a trip! Heck, if I had a couple 10,000 yen notes on me, I'd be offering up a toast to you right now!"

"Well, I know people say the guy on the 10,000 yen note was a big drinker and all, but…" Ajisai-san looked down at her fingers. "O-okay, sure."

Good. I'd gotten through to her.

Yet just as I breathed that inner sigh of relief, she shook her head. "No, never mind. I just can't let you pay. This isn't the same thing as going to a café with the whole group."

"Why not?"

“I mean, because. Well. It was bad of me to run away from home.” Ajisai-san looked so serious. “I left my brothers behind when I ran away. I’m a terrible big sister. And then, to make matters worse, I forced you to come with me. It’d be far too selfish of me to only pay for half of it.”

What was she talking about? I couldn’t follow her logic at all. Because she was a bad older sister, she had to pay twice her fair share? She sounded like she was punishing herself.

“W-would…” I began. I felt almost on the verge of tears. Spending my money on her really wasn’t a big deal, but when I looked at her, I felt like she was rejecting me, like going “This is all just *you* being selfish. I never wanted you to tag along.”

I wanted to set the facts straight, no matter what it took. Maybe, I thought, I could tell her this was paying her back for how she always had my back at school. But nah… You don’t pay people for having your back.

“Um. Well. Would…”

But I also didn’t think that being real friends meant that one person paid for everything. Did that mean that Ajisai-san and I still weren’t real friends? Oh god…

If Mai were in my shoes, she would have proudly declared, “Money is no object.” That cheater. If a commoner like me were to say that, I’d just get ignored for sure. Well, what would Satsuki-san do? Surprisingly, I had a feeling she’d accept Ajisai-san’s offer to pay. She’d just go, “Oh, thank you,” and swallow Ajisai-san’s kindness hook, line, and sinker. Making that choice took real guts. Now, if it were Kaho-chan, she would have giggled and joked, “Don’t worry! I just won the lotto, so I’m flush with cash!” thereby sending the serious topic packing with her charm.

But I wasn’t equipped to do any of those things, and the words just wouldn’t come out. I had to keep it together, but I was moments away from bursting into tears.

“Ajisai-san, would…would…” I said. *Would it have been better had I not come along?*

I bit those words back before I could say them. If I had voiced that question, it’d have been over for me, and besides—I knew that coming along with Ajisai-san had been the right thing to do. I *had* to believe

that I'd made the right choice.

Ajisai-san made a face like she was looking at something pitiful and started to apologize. "I'm sorry, Rena-chan. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just didn't want to put this burden on you."

I suddenly lurched to my feet.

A shadow crossed Ajisai-san's face. "Rena-chan?" she asked.

I put my hands on her shoulders and stared down at her slender form. I had no choice but to take the one road I was capable of.

"A-all right, Ajisai-san," I said. "I'll accept…but on one condition."

She looked bewildered. "Wh-what's the condition?"

"First, you and I need to…get physical…"

"Get physical…?"

Her cheeks turned red, and, in a fit of desperation, I announced, "Yes! First, let's compete in a physical sport!"

Ajisai-san and I faced each other across a table.

She was utterly baffled. "Uh…"

"If I win," I declared, "then we're splitting the bill!"

"I don't think that's how it works," she said.

"Nope! Nope, nope, nope. There's no freaking way I can let you shoulder all the costs. If you're just going to pay for it all, then you'd have been better off leaving me behind. In fact, that means I'd better leave right now!"

Everything that I'd clammed up on earlier was pouring out of me now! Oh, I was done for.

"Oh, that'd be such a pity," she said. "I'd hate that."

Maybe I wasn't done for at all! To hell with being done for!

"I won't!" I said. "I promise, I won't. I'll go rent my own room next door and spend the whooole time with you. And if you have a problem with that, then you'll have to beat me in a ping-pong match first!"

"Rena-chan, you're making no sense at all."

Yeah, and? This was how I'd worked things out with Mai and

Satsuki-san. I was the kind of gal who only made progress after fighting and winning first.

We'd borrowed paddles and ping-pong balls before heading off for the courts. Now we faced each other, two high school girls armed with yukatas, slippers, and ping-pong paddles.

In the end, all I was able to do was pitch a frantic struggle and throw this fit of mine while on the verge of tears. What was pride, anyway? I'd done away with pride long before, back when I went bowing to my little sister and confessing that I wanted to be popular too.

"Without further ado, let's get this match underway!" I cried.

"Oh, jeez," Ajisai-san sighed.

Before she could talk me out of it, I made an underhand serve. The ping-pong ball click-clacked its way into enemy territory, whereupon Ajisai-san sent it right back easily.

Uh, hello? She was really good!

"So if you lose," she asked, "does that mean you'll let me pay for you?"

Thwack.

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it. I'll think up something else."

Thwack.

"Say what? Okay, then that means that if *I* lose, I won't split the bill either."

"What?!" I cried.

"It's no fair otherwise," she said.

The rally kept going with a thwack, thwack, thwack. Secretly, I was not too shabby at ball games (and ball games alone, mind you). My mom and sister both had great reflexes, so some vestige of their great power slumbered within me too.

But Ajisai-san was even more talented than I was! No wonder she was one of our class's social elite. I always pictured her as so cute and ditzy she'd be liable to trip over her own hem, but her perfection had no blind spots, not even in athletics!

The ball nimbly dodged past my racket. Grr!

The rules said that whoever got to ten points first won, and as we played on, Ajisai-san took a bigger and bigger lead over me. Darn it! If this kept up, I'd lose for sure.

Following in Satsuki-san's footsteps, I decided to employ a meta tactic. So I spoke up and said, "Anyway, it's pretty nice to run away and go on a trip like this, huh? Let's not worry about the money and just have fun! We can sleep in until noon and laze about or go for a stroll all day if we'd like."

"That's not the point," she said. "I got you dragged into my own mess. Besides, you're already giving up your time to be with me!"

As she served the ball, I realized that in that partially hunched-over position, I could see…oh lordy…a brief glimpse of her bra! And it was completely destroying my concentration! Plus, the sleeves were so wide that I could see her bare thighs! *Trying to seduce your opponent is against the rules, Ajisai-san!*

"Why are you being so stubborn, Ajisai-san?" I yowled.

Thwack.

"It's literally tens of thousands of yen on the line!"

Thwack.

"Yeah, I know! But it's fine. I got money out of my bank account for this exact purpose!"

"Then use it on something important!"

"I *am* using it on something important!" I slammed the ball onto Ajisai-san's side of the court. She went to pick it up and then sighed, her shoulders moving with the weight of her breathing. *Yeah, me too, Ajisai-san,* I thought.

"Ajisai-san." I was running out of composure to think things through, so I just admitted how I felt. "Ajisai-san, you're important to me. You're my friend."

"And the same goes for you, of course," she said.

"But Ajisai-san, if you were in my shoes, would you let your friend pay for you?"

Her eyes widened as my question went there. "Well…" she said.

“To me, friends are people who help each other, who lean on each other, who laugh together as they go on. Do you not agree with me?”

It finally hit me, as the words were coming out of my mouth, that I wasn’t upset because she wouldn’t take my money. It was the line she’d drawn in the sand, the one that said she’d be fine on her own from here on out, which made me sad. Because, to me, friends were people who showed each other their vulnerabilities.

Ajisai-san stared down at the ping-pong ball in the palm of her hand. “I just…” she said. “I only want to give you the happy moments.”

“I mean…”

“I don’t want you to ever have to experience what it’s like being sad or upset. I wish I could take all of that on for you. That’s how I feel about my friends…and my loved ones.”

Ajisai-san’s version of friendship was radically different from mine. Mind you, I wasn’t qualified to comment on whether this was a good or a bad thing. But for me to have only the fun parts? And in return, she’d shoulder all the hardships? That didn’t sit right with me.

“But if you do that,” I said, “then you’re just overextending yourself all of the time!”

“I know I have limits,” she said. “But if you’re feeling upset, then I still want to do everything I can to make you feel better. To me, other people’s happiness is my happiness.”

I’d heard that sentiment all the time, but I’d never met anyone who actually meant it. This explained why she was so kind to everyone.

“Oh,” I said. My face must have been an open book right now.

Ajisai-san nodded and then gave me a forlorn smile. “In the end, I only try to make people happy because it makes me feel good. It’s all for my own sake, really.”

“All of it?” I repeated.

Even now, her voice sounded so clear, flowing into my ears like a stream of clean water. “I’m sorry, Rena-chan. I’m really not a nice person at all. I just force all my friends to be happy since it helps me feel better.”

When Ajisai-san talked about her own selfishness, she made it sound like it was some serious sin. “Honestly,” she said, “I’m so selfish.

I'm always smiling and trying to look cute all the time, because in the end, it's all about me, me, me. I want people to think I'm nice. I'm only nice to everyone because I like it when they're happy."

She half closed her eyes and smiled as she continued lambasting herself. "Sorry for going on about how shallow I am. This must have ruined your mental image of me, right?"

Remember how, before we'd gotten here, Satsuki-san had warned me to prepare myself? She'd said, "If you were to strip off her outer layer, even she would reveal an ugly side." And maybe that'd turned out to be true, but all the same—I wasn't about to be swayed by that pedantic bullshit.

I swung the paddle from side to side and yelled, "What are you even going on about? So what if you're nice to people because it gives you joy? That still doesn't change the fact that you're nice to people!"

"R-ena-chan…?"

I pointed straight at her. "It's not words that make people. It's their actions! No matter what thought goes into them, your actions have helped people. Like me, for instance!"

Ajisai-san wasn't an angel because she was all bubbly and sweet. Looking out for everyone and helping them was what *made* her an angel.

"What with how kind you are," I went on, "I could take a hundred years and still not be able to pay you back in full. You've already scored too many affection points with me, Ajisai-san!"

"Scored what now…?"

"If other people's happiness is your happiness, then we should stay together forever. Because I'm *always* happy every minute I'm with you. We'll create a perpetual happiness machine! But if you pay for me, that won't make me happy. So, the only logical argument is for us to split the bill. Bam, I win!"

"Rena-chan, I'm being serious," she said, looking slightly ticked off.

"And I'm dead serious!" I shot back. "Just like how it is for you, your happiness is my happiness. Plus, I swore that I'd make you happy on this runaway trip of ours!"

"D-don't be weird," she said. "My happiness doesn't do you any

good."

"What do you mean?" I spluttered. "It does me plenty good! The nicer I am to you, the more I become an actually helpful person, and the more self-esteem I gain."

"But you could be nice to anyone, then," she said. "It doesn't have to be me."

"Yes, it most certainly does! Because I'm here with *you*!"

I smashed the ping-pong ball back at her. She brought up her paddle to try and stop it, but the ball bounced off in a weird direction.

"There's nothing better than you accepting my affection, when you're, like, literally an angel," I said. "Just the fact that you're alive saves me. I'm your biggest fan! You're so cheerful, so fun to talk to, so considerate of everyone's happiness, so, so… It's crazy! You're everything! I have nothing but gratitude for you."

"B-but…" she said, her cheeks reddening. "If it wasn't for this being a special occasion, I'd just be acting like my normal self, you know?"

"Th-that's good to hear. I mean, if you were being nice to me for my sake, the little money I have wouldn't be enough. I'd have to give you every yen I earn for the rest of my life."

"Don't you think that's kind of extreme?" she asked.

"Whatever!" As Ajisai-san started to look creeped out (although all I'd done was say how I really felt about her), I barreled on. "Now that I know the truth, I like you even more. So you know what? Nope! I won't let you have your way and pay for me."

"But why?" She picked up the ball and argued back. "Don't be weird! I mean, you've just found out what a horrid person I am."

"You know what's horrid? An eighth-grader who uses the fact that her sister is friends with a model to get attention!"

"D-do you really know someone like that?"

Sorry, Sis! I thought. "Anyway, if we're going to talk disguising ourselves, you need to get on my level. You're putting on a daily makeup routine to go to school, and I'm basically a Hollywood special effects artist over here!"

Ajisai-san served the ball. "That's not true," she said. "You're

super cute, Renako, and you're really nice. I know, since you sit behind me in class. It makes school more fun, and I always like spending break with you."

This was dangerous business! I almost bit through my tongue and died on the spot. Mind you, I didn't tell her, because it'd only become a big mess again if I started putting myself down.

"So don't say something so sad like paying for yourself," I insisted. "I'm here with you right now because I want to be. I want to share the fun with you *and* be there for you when you're going through tough times too. There's no freaking way I'd stick around only for the good stuff. I want to share the bad things with you too, Ajisai-san, because I really, really care for you!"

Contrary to my vocal enthusiasm, I swung and completely missed the incoming ball. Oh. Huh. My vision was blurring with tears.

"Rena-chan…" she said.

It was only then that I actually realized I was crying. Huh? When did that start? *No, Ajisai-san, it's not what it looks like,* I thought. I wasn't sad or anything. I'd just gotten so overemotional that it was all pouring out in sobs. Yeah, these weren't malicious tears! I wasn't trying to use them to win pity points!

Ajisai-san came over to me, still clutching her paddle, and wrapped her arms around me as I stood there shedding tears.

"I'm sorry, Rena-chan," she said.

"Uh-huh…" I blubbered back.

"I'm sorry I didn't understand how you felt."

"N-no, don't be sorry…"

I could feel her soft body all around me through that thin fabric. *Urk. Sorry,* I thought. Still, this sure made for a nice perk!

"And I'm sorry for making you upset," she said. "I was only thinking about myself, but I swear I didn't mean to make you feel that way. I'm really sorry."

Ajisai-san snuffled through a congested nose. Huh?!

"I'm really happy to hear you think this way," she said. "Thank you, thank you very much."

Ohhhh no. At this rate, she'd cause me to turn on the waterworks.

Well, no, I was already crying. I mean normal, unhappy crying!

"A-Ajisai-san…" My voice was warbling all over the place. Oh, to hell with it. My head was a mess.

Us two yukata-clad girls, far away from home, hugged each other in that otherwise empty ping-pong court and sobbed snotty tears all over one another. But…in my case, I think I was crying because of how warm Ajisai-san felt as she hugged me. I felt closer to her now than I ever had before.

In the end, me and my piss-poor speaking skills, coupled with my inability to get a grip on my emotions and subsequent blubbering, caused Ajisai-san no end of trouble. So much for my three months of experience trying to be an extrovert. Apparently, I still didn't have what it took. The whole debacle only wrapped up without further fuss because Ajisai-san had very kindly gotten the gist of what I'd been trying to say. But at the very least, we could have done without the crying, you know? If only I could get rid of my emotions and become a robot. Yeah, time for me to take a trip on the *Galaxy Express 999*.

Ajisai-san and I sat side-by-side on the bench in the ping-pong court, and she held my hand until I calmed down.

"You know…" I said. "This kind of reminds me of that one time when I fainted."

"The time we went to the department store? You really spooked me when you did that."

"Ugh, I'm sorry…"

Ajisai-san had just asked if she'd ruined my mental image of her, but if anything, I felt like me running my mouth had brought the moment she'd decide to ditch me all that much closer.

"Don't be," she said, accompanying her words with a slow shake of the head. "Even if you have flaws or cause me trouble occasionally, that never stops you from being so kind and considerate to me all the time. Right?"

"That's…" That's exactly what I'd wanted to say to Ajisai-san.

Ajisai-san touched our linked hands to her cheek. It felt warm against my skin.

“Thanks,” she said. “Really, Rena-chan. I always get so stuck in my own head, but you remind me about what really matters.”

“Uh, do I really…?” I mean, this had been one of those situations where I had no real skill to pull it off, so I’d had to pull out all the stops to make it work.

Ajisai-san closed her eyes and smiled. “You know the kiddos? I’ve realized now that we’re apart, that even if they don’t listen to me and are always driving me up the wall, I really do care about them.” She giggled softly. “Sorry. It’s rude of me to bring them up when you’re here crying.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” I said. I mean, the crying part was my own fault, after all. “Besides, I don’t really care if you say something rude. I want to know you even better, so I like seeing these other facets of you.”

“Really?”

She let the hands against her cheek fall and squeezed my hand in hers. “Oh yeah, so I heard that there’s going to be a festival tomorrow,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I think I want to have a whole bunch of fun here and then go home,” Ajisai-san went on. “Besides, if we stay too long, it’ll cost you lots of money.”

At those words, my eyes swam again with fresh tears.

“N-no, don’t get me wrong,” she said. “I’m not saying that like it’s a bad thing. It’s a good thing, really. I took your words to heart… I’m not sure why, but it feels like a huge weight’s been lifted off my shoulders.”

She beamed at me with the same smile I saw every day in class, the one like a bell that announced the start of another wonderful day.

“Well…I’m glad to hear that,” I said. I gave her another watery smile of my own. Really, I *was* glad to hear that. If it’d made Ajisai-san decide to go home, then I guess there was some good in this display of shameful behavior after all. Wait, no, I shouldn’t try to justify it. One of these days, I’d have to learn how to resolve situations better. *Hurry up, Renako,* I told myself. *Make some progress. Grow! Evolve!* I mean, in this day and age of online communication, you could still evolve even the

trade-only guys on your own.

Ajisai-san let go of my hand and crossed her arms over her chest. She looked away from me and muttered, “B-by the way, you went a little overboard on the compliments again…”

“Huh?”

Her cheeks turned pink. I stared at her, wondering what she was hinting at.

She paused for a moment and then said, “You really do care for me, don’t you, Rena-chan?”

“Huh?!”

I felt like my face was about to explode into a ball of fire. Turned away from me as she was, I couldn’t see her face, but nothing could disguise her flaming red ears.

“O-o-o-o-of course I care for you!” I said.

She chuckled in self-satisfaction. “I *see*.”

What, was she just pretending to be bashful? And how come she was getting embarrassed when *she* was the one teasing *me*? Sure, I was glad to take any part of Ajisai-san I could get, but all the same… Wait, had I just caused her to update into Ajisai-san Version 2.0? No, you had to be kidding me.

“O-oh, anyway!” she said, putting on a peppy tone of voice as she rushed to change the topic. “Hey, Rena-chan, look at that.”

“What is it?”

She pointed to the scoreboard which read: 10–7.

“Oh,” I said.

I hadn’t been paying the slightest bit of attention to how the competition was going, but…I guess it had already been settled!

I trembled like a leaf. “Please!” I said. “I really do want to pay!”

“Hmm, what’s this now?” Ajisai-san grinned at me playfully. “I don’t know, Rena-chan, what should I do?”

She was a fallen angel! Behold, the Ajisai-san of my imagination, to whom human fates were but a plaything!

“P-please,” I begged. “If you don’t take my money, then I’ll be too ashamed of myself to call you my friend.”

“Aww, what? But I won, didn’t I?”

“Y-yeah, but… I dunno, there’s got to be some other way. I’ll do anything.”

Just as I said that, Ajisai-san grinned at me like I’d practically stolen the words right out of her mouth. Huh?

“You’ll do anything, hmm?” she said, her voice rising in excitement. “Well, in that case…”

Ohhhhhhh god. Now Ajisai-san was about to demand something ridiculous of me. What terrifying thing would it be?

“N-no, there’s no freaking way,” I protested. I stood rooted in place in the freaking *bathhouse changing room*.

We’d had a delicious dinner, and then Ajisai-san had called home to tell her folks she was coming back—granted, it sounded like she put off talking to her brothers for another occasion—and everything was all squared away. All that remained was for Ajisai-san to enjoy her fun vacation. Or, rather, that *should* have been all that remained!

But right before my very eyes was Ajisai-san, slowly taking off her inn yukata. She blushed slightly as she noticed me staring and gave me a reproachful look.

“Nuh-uh, you can’t back out of this,” she said. “I won fair and square, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but still!”

“We agreed we’d split the costs evenly, so can’t you at least let me have this? Or what, do you not want to get in the hot spring with me, Rena-chan?”

I gritted my teeth. Flanked on both sides by the appeal to my emotions and the fact of her victory, my defenses crumbled under her onslaught.

We were currently in one of the private hot springs that you could rent out at this inn. It was smaller than a big communal bath, but it was still waaaaay larger than the normal-sized bathtub you’d see in a house. It was actually quite a treat; this inn we’d ended up in really wasn’t too shabby. Well, it made sense, considering I was tagging along with Ajisai-san, she who was beloved by God. She just had all the luck.

“Fiiiiiine,” I said. “It would be my pleasure to accompany you tonight, madam.”

Ajisai-san giggled. “Yay!”

She then turned her back to me and wasted no time in disrobing. She had a set of white, lacy undergarments underneath, because even Ajisai-san’s private parts wore the height of fashion. Naturally, we needed to be naked in order to get into the bath, so Ajisai-san undid her bra hooks with a snap. Her boobs jiggled softly when they lost their support. *Those things were enormous!*

Still facing away and affording me a glimpse of her small butt in the process, she clutched her arms to her chest and giggled like she was getting cold feet. “I-I’m actually getting kinda shy,” she admitted. “I wonder why, though. I mean, it’s just the two of us.”

“Y-yeah, I’m kind of shy too,” I said. “Let’s get in the big communal bath!”

“Nuh-uh, not happening.”

Almost angrily, she snapped off the last piece of her clothing. *Eep!* I spun away. Using a towel to cover her chest, Ajisai-san walked by as naked as the day she was born, looking like she’d just stepped out of *The Birth of Venus*. I heard the sound of the bathhouse door opening.

“Ooh, it’s an open-air bath!” she said. “Come on, Rena-chan, hurry up. It’s so nice out here.”

“Oh god…”

This was so utterly embarrassing I had no idea what to do. Seeing Ajisai-san naked was mortifying enough, but being *seen* naked was on a whole other level!

“If nothing else, I wish I’d gone on a diet this summer…” I mumbled to myself.

I inched out of my yukata as slowly as a sloth. *Come on,* I told myself. I’d already bathed with Mai and Satsuki-san before. It was just Ajisai-san. I didn’t have to be nervous.

Okay, no freaking way was I getting through this without anxiety, but I’d just have to pull through somehow!

I put my underwear in the hamper and stepped outside too. Night had long since fallen, and there in the center of a tiled floor was a

wooden bath that three or so adults could comfortably stretch out in. Ajisai-san stood in front of it, looking up at the night sky.

"See?" she said. "It feels nice out here."

Her naked body was bathed in starlight in that otherwise twilight realm. She looked delicate and almost in danger of snapping, like a single thin stem supporting an enormous flower's head of petals.

She put a hand to her head to keep the breeze from whipping up her hair and grinned. "Come on, Rena-chan."

Having stripped off her clothes, Ajisai-san's beauty was such that I almost felt like a traveler caught in the allure of a fairy in a spring, dragging me into her fantasy realm. Things were completely different with Mai and Satsuki-san. I wasn't acclimated to this in the slightest! They say that a girl's body in her first year of high school is too immature for her to truly be called a woman, but Ajisai-san's body was perfect already. She was so attractive that she took my breath away.

Unable to look at her any longer, I folded in on myself and made my way to the small washing area. Ajisai-san came and sat down beside me.

"Oh, good thinking," she said. "We need to wash up first before we can soak, huh?"

"Y-yeah, exactly."

Moving as jerkily as a figurine with a limited range of motion, I twisted the lever and let a gush of hot water from the shower head rain down over me. Then I picked up the body soap and lathered myself up.

"Are you nervous, Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san asked me.

"I mean, a little," I admitted.

"But you and Satsuki-san took a bath together."

"Bwuh!"

Thanks to the cross-examination I got at Satsuki-san's birthday party, it was now common knowledge in our friend group that we'd bathed together. But what was Ajisai-san doing bringing it up here?

"I-I mean, I was plenty nervous then too!"

"More than now?"

"I-I think about the same," I said.

When I didn't turn away, I could see Ajisai-san's pale body, and for a split second, Satsuki-san's naked body also came to mind, dimly illuminated and truly gorgeous.

Just then, Ajisai-san said, "Gotcha," and poked my upper arm.

I about jumped out of my skin. "Huh?! What was that for, Ajisai-san?"

"…Just because?"

Her calm voice echoed in the bathing area, sounding ever so slightly steamy.

In an attempt to dispel the awkward tension, I exclaimed, "Oh, yeah! Did I ever tell you about the huge blunder that happened during the time I bathed with Satsuki-san? I slipped in the tub, and when I reached out, I grabbed her boobs for dear li—"

Just then, my powers of reasoning arrived in this world and made their first newborn cries, namely, *What the hell do you think you're doing telling her that?*

I hurriedly parked my butt right back down and turned away from her. "Dinner was great tonight, don't you think?" I said. "It had a whole lotta seafood in it."

"You did what to her boobs now?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Well, I have to admit that I didn't actually recognize anything apart from the tuna. All white fish pretty much look the same, you know?"

"Rena-chan, what did you do to her boobs? Hmm? Rena-chan?"

Ajisai-san would not let me go. A shiver traveled up my spine. *Eeep.*

"I may have accidentally…stuck my hands out and grabbed her boobs for dear life…" I admitted.

"Huh?!"

Why, oh why, had I disclosed that? My desire to die on the spot was rising by the minute.

"A-and what happened after that?" she asked.

"Oh, you know… I apologized and ran out of the bathroom…"

I opened and closed my hands on empty air. It had been as much

of a near death experience as the time when I was almost hit by a car as a little kid, and as a result, I didn't even remember what her boobs felt like. And you know what? That's probably a good thing.

"That must have been so embarrassing," she said. "Sorry for dragging up bad memories."

Oh great, now Ajisai-san felt bad for me. "No, it's fine," I said. "By the way, you know the kanji character for 'embarrassing'? It has the kanji for 'ear' in it, so some people say that's because embarrassment shows up in your ears even when you don't want it to. My ears must be bright red by now, I bet."

I laughed weakly.

"Uh, um…" Ajisai-san suggested in a shy little voice. "Rena-chan, would you…touch my boobs too?"

"Wait, why?!"

Ajisai-san's ears were also turning scarlet. "I don't mean it in a weird way!" she cried.

But what other way was there?! How else was I supposed to take "Wanna fondle my titties?"?!

"I just meant, um, as a way for you to overwrite those bad memories!" she said. "Because it'd be nice to replace that embarrassing moment with Satsuki-san with something else, right? M-mine are pretty big, see, so do you want to give them a shot? You know, that's all I was going for!"

"O-oh, gotcha, I see what you mean now!"

"Y-yeah, uh-huh! Exactly!"

"O-okay, then don't mind if I do!"

"G-go right ahead!"

I wheeled about to face her, and she thrust her chest straight out at me. Wait, was this. Like. Legit happening? She squeezed her eyes shut, pinning her boobs in between her arms to make them bulge out even more. They looked so white and soft. I felt like I was dreaming, but the sight of them filled me with dread. C-could I touch *these*…? Could *I* touch these? Could I really get my fingerprints all over this tender skin usually hidden away under a uniform? Like, was this actually allowed? Wasn't this like taking a box cutter to a maestro's

masterpiece?

But at the same time, I knew that if I was like, “Nope, I think I’m good, actually!” and booked it out of there, I’d be throwing Ajisai-san’s kindness back in her face right after she’d gone and summoned up the courage to do this for me. I was really stuck between a rock and a hard place here.

…Okay. I’d touch ’em. I mean, they were just boobs. Hell, I had boobs too. My one hang-up was that I was touching Ajisai-san, but it was the same as pinching her cheek or patting her on the shoulder. There was no need to overthink it.

“Okay,” I said, in what I have to admit was really just an attempt at encouraging myself. “Here I go!”

“A-all right!”

My hands crept forward. I pushed my pointer finger into the bouncy flesh. *Ohhhh my god.* It was worlds different from touching my own tits. Hers felt as soft as marshmallows. And besides, these were no ordinary tits. They were *Ajisai-san’s* tits. Just as Marilyn Monroe’s hair sold for 880 thousand yen despite practically everyone on Earth having hair, Ajisai-san’s boobs were priceless.

Right now, I was blessed with the unbelievable godsend that everyone who had met and everyone who would someday meet Ajisai-san would never, ever get a chance to do, no matter how much they wanted it. I felt like I was making some sort of horrible, horrible transgression.

“U-um, Rena-chan,” she said.

I gasped. Lost in la la land as I was, I hadn’t noticed that I’d been feeling her up all over.

“Th-that kind of tickles…” she said. “N-not that I mind, though, not at all!”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

Okay, one last touch! I thought, and I reached out for the final go. But I was so flustered about it that I missed the mark and accidentally ended up squeezing the tips of her breasts.

Ah.

Ajisai-san made a mewling noise and then covered her mouth with her hands. We locked eyes with each other. Her face turned bright red.

She laughed very, very awkwardly. “Th-that weird noise just slipped out,” she said.

I followed suit with the awkward laughter. I couldn’t say a word anymore; I just laughed like a total idiot.

Unfortunately, despite all of her kind consideration, this hadn’t done away with any of my memories of Satsuki-san’s boobs. All it had done was open up a new storage folder in my mind labeled “the sensation of Ajisai-san’s boobs.” I knew then that I’d never forget this for as long as I lived.

We both washed our hair and pretended to be utterly invested in that process before sitting down next to each other in the hot spring.

I refused to so much as glance to the side, because I knew that if I did, Ajisai-san’s boobs would fill up far too much of my field of vision again.

She sighed in contentment. “The heat feels lovely.”

“Y-yeah, for sure,” I agreed.

Ajisai-san had her hair pinned up as she sunk into the hot water and sighed. I’d planned on sticking around for maybe two seconds before dipping out because of the awkwardness, but there was something really funny about this whole hot spring thing. Over time, the water worked its magic on the weight of my nerves, just like it would for stiff shoulders. Apparently, hot springs were an effective remedy for social anxiety too. I was still anxious, but it was a level of anxiety I could actually deal with. So, I figured I’d stay here a bit longer and look up at the stars twinkling away in the night sky.

You know, come to think of it, we’d both done an awful lot of walking around today. It felt good to let our exhaustion melt away in

the hot water. I sighed too. This had been one heck of a jam-packed day. I mean, I'd left Tokyo at the crack of dawn, gone all the way into the countryside, booked a room at this inn, played ping-pong with Ajisai-san, gotten into the tub with her, and touched her boobs.

Naturally, as this was the first time we'd spent the whole day together, I felt like we'd grown a little closer as friends—actually, scratch that. A ton closer. She'd called herself selfish and rotten, but that hadn't been my takeaway at all. I thought she was a hardworking, admirable, kind, and super, super cute angel. If anything, she seemed even more angelic than before.

All this nonsense had really wiped me out, but all the same…I was glad I'd come along with her. Yeah. I really was.

"Hey, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said.

"Yeah?"

"I thought that conversation we were having earlier about friends was super interesting."

"You think?"

"I've never really had a deep conversation like that with anyone before."

"Huh. Wow." I was surprised that she and I were in the same boat.

"Uh-huh," she said. "I guess the way I think about my friends is kind of weird. It's too…serious, you know?"

"No, don't say that," I said. "I know I mentioned this earlier, but you're honestly such a lifesaver. I'm glad you care about your friendships so much. Or, well, admittedly, I think I might be too serious when it comes to friendships too…"

"Yeah, you kind of are." She chose her words carefully as she continued. "You sounded less like you were talking about friends and more about…romantic partners, I guess."

"Urk."

Mai said the same thing once before—that people who leaned on each other and shared everything with each other were called lovers. Mai's sensibility was all out of whack, so I hadn't put much stock in her claim, but when even Ajisai-san was pointing it out, I started to feel like maybe *I* was the one who wasn't on the right page.

“But if we were to switch the question around,” Ajisai-san said, “how do you define a romantic partner?”

“Huh? You’re asking me?”

“Yeah. I guess I’m trying to ask…what’s the difference between a friend and a lover?”

I splashed my face with the hot water. What *was* the difference between a friend and a lover? I’d looked at this question from every angle thanks to Mai’s advances, and I still didn’t have a good answer. All the same, I still thought it over a little every day.

“This is just my opinion, mind you,” I began.

Ajisai-san giggled. “I mean, you’re the one I asked.”

“Fair point… Anyway, uh. I’ve been thinking recently that maybe…maybe platonic affection and romantic affection aren’t all that different after all.”

“They’re not that different?” she repeated.

“Yeah. What’s important is what you want out of your relationship with the other person, I mean.” The words slipped out like I was having a conversation with my own heart. “For instance, I want my friends to be people I can talk about anything with. But if we go off of what you said earlier, Ajisai-san, then that’s what some people would call being lovers, right?”

I laughed to fill up the silence. “It’s weird, huh? We can both be talking about the same things but use completely different words to do it. Anyway, uh.” I scratched my cheek. “It’s kind of surprising, but I don’t think it’s really as simple as just friendship and romantic love. When you put two circles next to each other, I think there’s like…an overlap, you know.”

As I glanced at her to see her reaction, I hastened to add on, “Oh, uh. You know those old dating sims, right? You can only get together with a character if you raise both your friendship and love meters. When I think about all of you in my friend group, I really want to get closer to you guys as friends even while I really, really admire and love you at the same time… So, you know, it’s like…”

I laughed to try to save face after prattling on like that. I mean, there were lots of different details in the two concepts. For instance, you could only ever date one person at a time, but you could have lots

of friends at once.

"If you both think you're friends, then that's what you are," I said. "If you call yourselves lovers, then that's what you are too. I don't think there's a clear difference. Friendships and romantic relationships are sort of ambiguous, you know?"

When you had a relationship with ambiguous boundaries like that, I didn't think you needed to follow common opinion or whatever someone else thought about it. I thought it was okay for people to decide that part for themselves, just like how Mai and I had ended up as friends with Renafits… *Well, Mai is a special case,* I admitted, as an image of her came to mind. My mental image of Mai leered an unsettling grin when she saw Ajisai-san in the bath next to me. Eep! Darn you, my friend with Renafits… *Why must you make me feel so absurdly guilty?* We were supposed to be friends, so why'd I feel this way? Oh, the curse of the Renafits!

Ajisai-san carefully laid her hand over mine under the water.

"And what about me?" she asked.

"Huh?" Oh, she meant the part about closeness and admiration. "Oh, uh, well, of course I admire you. You're at the top of my list for people I admire, silly! Duh!"

"Really now?"

Her soft palm stroked the back of my hand. It kind of tickled, and I felt weirdly bashful.

"I-I mean, that's just what I think," I said. "What about you, Ajisai-san? How do you define the difference between romantic partners and friends?"

Ajisai-san thought about it for a minute. "I…don't know yet, I think."

"O-oh, really?"

"You're incredible, Rena-chan. You think through a lot of things, and I really respect that."

"W-what, do you admire me too? Nah, just kidding."

I'd gotten too carried away for a sec there, but Ajisai-san grinned ever so lightly. "Yeah," she said.

Oof. A jolt ran all the way through me like I'd been thwacked by a

dodgeball. That had been one heck of a bad idea. I could handle her teasing me, but I was nooooooooot ready to tease her back!

After we got out of the hot spring, we took some time to dry our hair before heading back to our room and finding the two futons spread out side by side. Great. And just when I thought we'd gotten the requisite dip in the hot springs out of the way. I mean, it wasn't a big shocker, but now I had to spend the night sleeping next to Ajisai-san. We were both girls, but that didn't make me any less nervous. *Gulp.*

While Ajisai-san messed around on her phone, I stared at mine too to hide my anxiety as I mentally reviewed what we'd talked about today. Oh, I had a text from my sister.

When are you coming home, Oneechan? she asked.

As a member of her family, I knew her well enough to tell that she wasn't messaging me out of concern. My sister just fundamentally did not have any concern for me, so I assumed that my mom had asked her to message me or something.

I'm planning on being back the day after tomorrow, I texted back.

I'd told my sister before I left that I was heading out on a trip with Ajisai-san, so she didn't have to worry about me. Actually, my whole family, sister included, never worried about me. That meant that either my sister had pleaded my case especially well or that no one in my family cared about me at all. Not like I minded if it was the latter, really.

Okay, she said. *By the way, where are you guys staying?*

I was positive that this message was sent for some similar motive, like if she needed help with making dinner or if she thought she could get me to buy her a souvenir… Not like I minded, really!

Here, I said, and I sent her the address.

She didn't respond. My sister must have fulfilled her duty.

"Hey," Ajisai-san said, suddenly very close to me.

Oh god! That startled the heck out of me. "Y-yeah?" I asked.

She'd changed into her pajamas, which consisted of a long nightgown. Compared to my T-shirts and track pants, she was on a whole different level of fashion in the PJ department.

“Should we go to bed soon?” she asked.

A lovely scent drifted over to me. We must have both used the same shampoo and conditioner, but for some reason, she just smelled so nice.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” I said. “Good thinking.”

Looking at the clock, it really was getting close to bedtime. After plugging my phone in to charge and making a trip to the toilet, I crawled into my futon.

“I’ll get the lights,” she said.

“Sounds good to me.”

Ajisai-san flicked off the light switch and then got into the futon next to mine.

“Good night, Rena-chan.”

“N-night,” I said.

Oh god. Could I even get to sleep? I’d gotten up hella early this morning, so I should have been dead tired. And yet, nada. Come to think of it, I couldn’t recall ever sleeping next to someone like this before, just the two of us. Well, I *had*, and the most recent incidents were the two times with Satsuki-san. But in both of those cases, we’d gradually worked our way up to the sleepover part, so there’d been no time for me to get anxious.

Even with the shoji screen door closed, it wasn’t pitch black due to the faint moonlight outside. I could just barely see Ajisai-san’s angelic face as she slumbered next to me. Then her eyes snapped open, and she was looking right at me.

Huh?! My heart skipped a beat.

“Hey, Rena-chan?” she said.

“U-uh, yeah?”

“Do you have a crush on anybody?”

“Huh?!”

Ajisai-san giggled. “I just thought I’d ask. You know, like we’re on a field trip.”

“Ah, yeah, I getcha.”

“So? Who is it?”

“Huh?!”

She wasn’t just asking, she was full-on hounding me for answers.

“I-I don’t have a crush on anybody,” I said.

“Aw, you sure?” she asked.

“Yeah… I think.”

My legs were all fidgety. These freshly washed sheets were too smooth, and I just couldn’t seem to relax. My enthusiasm to make sure Ajisai-san was having fun and not getting too tired of me had somehow gone to bed before I did. All that was left was plain old me—the boring me, the one who only ever spoke her mind even when she shouldn’t.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a crush on anyone, really,” I admitted.

“Really? Not anyone?”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

A stuffed-animal-sized Mini Mai raised her hand and said, “Why, hello.” I shoved her away inside a cardboard box and sealed it off with a thick layer of packing tape. *You,* I told her, *are a friend.*

Anyway, besides her, uh… I cycled through my memories of junior high, elementary school, and kindergarten. Well, to begin with, I barely even talked to guys in junior high. I only hung around with my all-girl friend group, so I had trouble getting back on my feet after they all ditched me.

“Back in elementary school and all,” I said, “I had the sense that… you know, guys were guys, and girls were girls.”

“You’ve never been interested in a guy?”

“Hmm, not really… Oh, I take that back.”

“Ooh, go on,” she said.

“There was one guy I liked,” I admitted. “But I don’t know if it counts as romantic love, per se…”

“What was he like?” Ajisai-san’s curious eyes glittered in the dark like crystals in a cave.

I hesitated before eventually giving up and taking the plunge. “He was always such a dork and said the stupidest things, but you could always fall back on him when things got tough. He cared more about his friends than anyone else in the world could. Shockingly, he was also

a really good leader."

"Uh-huh?"

"Whenever he awoke his true powers, he'd be super strong and do everything right… But you know, even when his most powerful enemies pummeled him to bits, they could never wipe the confident smile off his face."

"Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said.

"Yeah?"

"Are you talking about a fictional character?"

Well, look at Akinator Ajisai-san over here. "Yeah," I admitted woodenly. He was a character from a manga I was nuts over at the time.

"Aha," she said. "So that was your first crush?"

"Uh…" I really wanted to tell her no, but I mean… There really hadn't been any others…

Mai thrust her head out of the cardboard box and went, "You rang?" whereupon I chucked her out the window. Yeah, I liked Mai, duh. But as a *friend*. Sure, my heart might have skipped one or two beats around her, but it did the same thing near Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san too. Just because something got my heart thumping didn't mean I was in love with it. I mean, you don't fall in love when you run marathons or go into haunted houses, right? It only stands to reason.

"Uh… So, what about you, Ajisai-san?" I asked. "Do you have a crush on anyone?"

"Me?" She lazily rolled over in the futon to face away from me. After a long "Hmmmmmmm," she went, "That's top secret."

"Wait, so you do?!"

"I dunno," she said. "But I think…I might have my eye on someone."

"Ooh." The angel of Ashigaya High was into someone? That had to be a real juicy scoop. I mean, not that I'd talk about it to anyone else, but still.

"So, is it, like, someone who goes to our school?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess," she said.

“Ooh. Who? C’mon, who is it?”

I was asking purely out of curiosity. I figured it had to be someone really hot. We sure had a lot of good-looking guys in our class, now that I thought about it. Plus, Shimizu-kun and Fujimura-kun both seemed pretty tight with her.

“Oh yeah, we’ve talked about crushes before,” I recalled.

“Uh-huh?”

“Yeah, I remember what you told me. You said you wanted someone you could let your guard down around.”

“T-true…” she said. She didn’t respond for a while. I guess she was embarrassed.

Clouds covered the moon outside, making the light in our room grow dimmer.

I mean, I didn’t want to force Ajisai-san to tell me if she didn’t want to talk. I was just on the verge of choosing the right moment to back out of this conversation when she suddenly said, “You know what?”

Her voice was so clear it felt like it was squeezing my head.

“What?” I said.

“I think I know the difference between friendship and love.”

“Oh, yeah?”

That was what we’d talked about in the hot spring. Oh boy, the hot spring… Urgh. I could still see her pale flesh and the line of her shoulders hidden under her yukata, not to mention feel the vivid sensation of her boobs in my hands. My face started feeling like it was on fire. *No, stop that,* I admonished myself. I’d never be able to sleep at this rate.

Yet the bombshell Ajisai-san lobbed at me turned out to be just as distracting. For the difference between friendship and love was…

“I think it comes down to whether or not the other person makes you horny,” she said.

Huh. Yeah, come to think of it, that checked ou—

…

“Wait, what?!” I screamed. She’d said it so casually that it’d

almost slipped past me. I couldn't see the look on her face, as she was turned away from me.

"Y-you really startled me," I said. "I didn't realize you talk about this kind of stuff too."

"I join in conversations about sex and stuff all the time," she said. "People are always telling me it's such a shocker, but I don't really *mind* talking about sex, you know?"

"Oh. Sorry, I kind of overreacted there."

We didn't make a lot of dirty jokes in our friend group, but our other classmates ate that stuff up. Ajisai-san hung out a lot with the other kids, so maybe she was into that kind of thing too.

"Why are you apologizing?" she asked, giggling. "Or what, do you have an issue with me in particular talking about it? I'm your precious angel, right?"

"Wha—I mean, no, not really, but it's like…"

I fumbled with my words, struggling to answer right off the bat. Sure, this was different from how I pictured her, but that wasn't really the issue.

"Anyway," she said, "this is another part of who I am. I think about these things too. So."

"G-gotcha." This conversation was so horribly provocative that it was all I could do just to respond to her.

But Ajisai-san did not ease up on her onslaught. "So do you ever look at your friends and get all hot and bothered, Rena-chan?"

Hello?!

"M-me?!" I spluttered. "Uh, hmm! That's a hard question!"

Did my friends ever make me feel hot under the collar? I mean, honestly…kinda, yeah!

But even though I didn't say anything, I could hear Ajisai-san trying to hold back a laugh and failing. "Aha, busted. Rena-chan's hooorny."

"I-I-I-I am not, I swear!"

Satsuki-san messing with me was bad enough, but it was a whole other level of shameful when Ajisai-san did it! I wasn't a ho, I swear!

Ugh, I could see Ajisai-san's devilish wings sprouting already…

"If this conversation gets too wild," she teased, "you'll be so wound up you won't be able to sleep."

"You can say that again… But it's not like that, I swear. I don't look at my friends that way."

"Uh-huh. Suuure," she said. Her reply coiled itself about my ears.

Ajisai-san rolled over in her futon. My eyes were adjusted well enough to the dark by now that I could see her sending me what looked to be a flirtatious glance. "Even if you do get turned on," she said, "you better not try to come on to me."

"Huh?!"

She tapped her lips with her index finger and beamed. "I know I'm running away from home, but don't be a lecherous wolf and take advantage of my heart while I'm all fragile, m'kay?"

I couldn't say a word.

Then, before the look she was giving me obliterated my ability to reason altogether, I pulled the blankets over my head and yelled, *"G-good night!"*

All I could do was pray that I'd somehow lose consciousness sometime before morning. *Please, Ajisai-san, don't tease little, naive me so…* I begged. *I'm not a bad girl, I swear!*

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story: Chapter 2
How Bizarre

THE FIRST TIME Ajisai ever spoke to Renako was on the second day of school at the train station when Renako came across Ajisai keeping out of the rain and lent her an umbrella. Ajisai immediately took her for a cute, friendly, outgoing girl. *She must have had tons of friends in junior high but left them all behind when she started here,* Ajisai reasoned. *So now she's trying to make lots of new friends.*

After Ajisai fell for Renako's scheme, the girls found that, by coincidence, Renako sat right behind Ajisai in class. Thus, they became fast friends.

Ajisai thought they were quite close. She had many friends to chat with, but Renako was the first of her high school friends to come over to her house to hang out. So, she supposed, did that mean Renako considered her to be a particularly special friend? She felt almost as if they were two elementary school girls making a secret pact to be best friends forever, and as a fan of the Sunday morning magical girl shows to this day, it made Ajisai's heart sing.

And then Renako had confessed her feelings to Ajisai. "You're my angel, so…I swear, I'll keep liking you forever!" said Renako.

Now enough time had passed that she understood what Renako had meant. There hadn't been any ulterior motive involved, nor had she said it to try and make Ajisai's heart skip a beat. It had been nothing more than a simple profession of her true feelings, in such a way that Ajisai wouldn't form the wrong impression of them.

And yet, for a time afterwards, even just the sight of Renako's face made Ajisai relive that moment, leaving her blushing and flustered.

She's so odd, Ajisai thought as she lay in the futon and looked over at Renako. Unable to fall asleep, she finally gave up trying and sat up. She went to the bathroom but did not go back to bed; instead, she sat down in a chair near the window.

She came along with me when I ran away, and she insisted on splitting the bill so much that she cried over it… Ajisai had put her foot down about paying Renako's share of the costs with a level of conviction that

she didn't normally show, because she thought that would make Renako fold. Renako was a sweet girl with a timidity she hated to show at school, and Ajisai thought that a little bossiness would make her agree to the plan. It was a mean plot, but then again, Ajisai was mean herself.

However, Renako had defied her expectations. Wasn't she afraid that such exaggerated behavior would ruin their friendship? After all, even the very best of friends could have a falling out over the tiniest things—Ajisai, who had shallow friendships everywhere, had seen it happen countless times. Renako tended to escalate things so quickly that it often made Ajisai worried about her when they hung out.

That's because I've never met anyone like her before, Ajisai thought. Renako wasn't like Ajisai, who constantly tried to gauge how other people were feeling and worked to keep the peace. Renako's frankness was, at times, deeply worrying and yet…at the same time, Ajisai envied her ever so slightly.

I'm glad it happened to work out okay this time, she thought. *It must have been a lucky break…* But no, she knew that wasn't right. Nothing about this was luck; everything Renako had done was intentional. Ajisai knew that Renako hadn't had any faith in her own ability to make everything turn out all right, but even so, that hadn't stopped her from striving for her desired outcome. And as a result of her hard work, she'd made it happen. That was all there was to it. She wasn't like Ajisai, who gave up right from the start and never stretched her roots outside of her plant pot. She wasn't like Ajisai at all.

That's right, Ajisai thought. *That's because Rena-chan is incredible. The better I get to know her, the more I realize she's completely out of my league.*

She put a hand to her chest over her nightgown. She could still feel a warm tingle where Renako had touched her. For some curious reason, she felt pained and took a deep breath. *What is this feeling?* she asked herself.

Ajisai looked up into the night sky. Clouds wreathed the hazy moon, making the light as indiscernible as the feelings in her own heart. *Your happiness is my happiness,* Ajisai had said, *even if I'm not happy myself.* That presented a contradiction, even if she hadn't meant it as a lie. When had she started repeating this phrase to distract herself from the pain in her heart? When had she started using this to punish herself?

If that was really true, Ajisai thought, *I wouldn't have needed to run away. I really should have just stayed home and sucked it up forever. But then…why do I feel this way? Why?*

Thinking of her dear friend lying beside her and breathing slowly in her sleep, Ajisai looked up at the moon and whispered:

"Why can't I fall asleep? Why does my heart feel like it's about to beat out of my chest?"

Neither the moon nor Ajisai had an answer.

Chapter 3:
There's No Freaking Way We Can Stay Like This Forever!

THERE'S A PHRASE out there: I care for everyone, and if they're happy, then I'm happy. But if anyone apart from Ajisai-san—Satsuki-san, for example—had said that, I would have been so freaked out that I'd have been like, "Did you hit your head?! We've got to get you to a hospital, now!" Yet Ajisai-san was so inherently kind to everyone that I believed her right off the bat.

Even so, how was I supposed to take that? I mean, let's say Ajisai-san came across a pretty piece of jewelry that didn't belong to anyone. If someone wanted it, did that mean she'd give it up with one of her usual smiles? As you can most certainly tell, I was a heck of a lot greedier, so I couldn't even imagine throwing away my own happiness just for someone else.

So I had to wonder… Was she actually happy? If she had even the slightest bit of reservation about giving it away, then I wanted Ajisai-san to have her own pretty jewelry too. I was a huge Ajisai-san fan, so her happiness was my happiness. Wait, was that the same way she felt?

Nah, something told me that this was different. I was a lot wickeder, and I only felt this magnanimous about Ajisai-san. Besides, this was purely based on self-interest, since having Ajisai-san's sparkling self around improved my QOL at school drastically. In the end, it all came back to me, me, me… If you looked up "brute" in the dictionary, you'd find the name Amaori Renako.

Ajisai-san didn't get up at breakfast time, since it looked like she'd been late to fall asleep the night before. I was concerned about her, but she told me not to worry, so I shamelessly wandered down to the dining hall and took breakfast on my own. There was bread, scrambled eggs, Vienna sausages, and a teeny little salad, which all tasted great. There was something special about having breakfast like this at an inn.

Had last night's conversation all been a dream? For some bizarre reason, I felt like Ajisai-san had gone, "Oh yeah, I talk about sex. All the time, really. If anything, I love talking about sex." Angels were made by

God; they didn't need to reproduce. So it must have been a dream after all.

Wait. But that meant I'd been having a dream like that about Ajisai-san. Wasn't that hideous? Wouldn't I be punished for my blasphemy?

I finished up breakfast in agony, and when I returned to our room, I found that Ajisai-san was still tossing and turning in her futon. I didn't want to wake her up all the way, so I decided to play a game in the next room.

I was just about to tiptoe away with my backpack, inside of which I'd stowed my handheld game console in case of emergencies, when a muffled voice from under the covers singsonged, "Rena-chan."

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you?"

The sliding screen doors were closed, so it was still pretty dark. A small hand flipped out from under the blanket in the gloom, beckoning me closer.

"Hm?" I went over to the futon, suspecting nothing, and in the next second—

Like a shark's mouth, the futon opened up and swallowed me whole! "Bwuh?!" I screamed as the world went dark around me. Huh?! Wh-wh-wh-what the heck was going on?

I heard a laugh right next to my ear, a chirping giggle the color of honey. Ajisai-san looked at me from where she lay to my side, having dragged me into the futon. She gave me a carefree, innocent grin.

"I gobbled you up, Rena-chan," she said.

A sound came out of my mouth that sounded like nothing I'd ever voiced before. Ajisai-san and I looked into each other's eyes there in her secret base, covered by the futon blanket. She giggled again and tucked the blanket, warmed by her body heat (oh god, it was warmed by her body heat), around me all cozy.

"Wh-what're you doing?" I asked.

"I just want to have a little more of a lie-in," she said.

"O-okay. So what does that have to do with me?"

"Because I wanted you to join me." She beamed and squeezed my fingers like she was a baby.

“R-really?” I said.

“Uh-huh.” She smiled gently, looking for all the world like a child too young to know the difference between right and wrong. “I was just thinking that I’d like to, mm, wrap you around my little finger today.”

“Say what now?!”

“Renako-oneechan!” she chirped.

She nuzzled her head into my chest.

“Wh-what?” I spluttered. Something had knocked a screw loose in Ajisai-san. Was it the getting up late thing? Or maybe the vacation thing? Or what if this was her reaction to being shut up in her house all the time? It was probably a combination of all three, but it still baffled the heck out of me. What was she doing? It was cute, don’t get me wrong! She was extraordinarily cute, but that wasn’t the point! What was I supposed to do?

She suddenly pulled away and looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes from a fatally close range. My breath died in my throat when her deep chestnut-colored eyes met mine.

Then immediately afterwards, she hugged me once more and squealed, “Renako-oneechan!”

“Um… Uh, there, there, Ajisai-san.”

She shook her head, her hair flying every which way and smacking my nose. It tickled, but at the same time, it smelled so good. Finally, a good, legitimate reason to appreciate the scent of Ajisai-san’s hair.

“I’m your little sister today, okay?” she said.

“You are…?” Ah, so the one at my house was an impostor. I’d always known there was something funny about her. Someone so socially adept could never be related to me.

“So, Renako-oneechan, what’re you supposed to call me?”

Here it was—the second ever Ajisai Quiz Bowl! Any wrong answers would be rewarded with a loss in her affection points.

“Huh?” I said. “Um… A-Ajisai-san?”

“Bzzt.” She pouted at me. *Eeep!*

True, I didn’t ever call my sister Haruna-san. But at the same time,

I couldn't just say Ajisai-san's name without an honorific. It would literally end me.

Summoning up my courage, I hesitantly mumbled, "A-Ajisai… chan?"

She lit up with a smile. "Renako-oneechan!"

Then she hugged me even harder than before, constricting my chest in the process. This little sister of mine was awfully demanding!

"A-Ajisai-chan," I said, "it's time to get up now."

"Aww, no way. I wanna keep lying in bed with Renako-oneechan."

"Okay, I'll give you a few more seconds. How many?"

"One hundred million!" she answered.

"Don't be dumb!" I yelled back.

Ajisai-san—Ajisai-chan, rather—wrapped her arms around me in a "I refuse to let you go" kind of pose. Her quiet breathing felt ticklish against my cleavage. Additionally, what with her own chest being so large and the lack of her wearing any sort of bra to bed, the soft sensation was just terrific. My face felt like it was on fire.

"FYI," she said, "one hundred million seconds is a little over three years and two months."

"Wow," I said. "You sure are smart, aren't you, Ajisai-chan?"

"Aren't I? Aren't I the *best*?"

"Y-yeah… You sure are."

She giggled in happy self-satisfaction as she hugged me. Now that she was freed up from all her big sisterly responsibilities, she seemed to be having a ball as a little sister. Well… Aw, screw it. I guess I needed to go all in on it too. What was a little embarrassment if I was doing it for Ajisai-san? Besides, we'd already bathed together the day before and everything.

"Um," I said. "What would you like to do today, Ajisai-chan?"

"Hmm. I wanna spend all day in bed with you, Renako-oneechan," she said.

"Don't you want to go play somewhere?"

"Nuh-uh. I wanna be super-duper lazy."

I guess my newfound little sister was regressing back to infancy here.

"You want to be a lazybones, huh?" I said.

"I don't wanna have to get the kiddos up in the morning or help them get dressed. I don't wanna have to make breakfast or pick up every single freaking Lego they've dumped on the floor."

"G-gotcha."

For a second there, I thought I'd seen a void staring back at me from behind her eyes, but it must have been my imagination. Ajisai-chan was still too young to be depressed.

Before we'd run away together, I was half-excited and half-nervous to see all these new sides of Ajisai-san. But I'd never dreamed that she would become my new little sister!

"Renako-oneechan," she whined in another vulnerable-sounding voice.

As we lay next to each other, our heads peeking out from under the covers, she hugged me once more. Every part of her felt so soft against me, so pleasant to the touch. *Huh. Odd,* I thought. What was happening? W-was I starting to get turned on?

No, no, no, no. I wasn't into Ajisai-san like that. She was my friend, and an angel to boot! If anyone looked at her with lust in their eyes, they would get the stuffing beaten out of them by yours truly!

She breathed "Oneechan" into my ear (Eep!) in a wheedling tone. Her sad eyes trembled. "So…you mean we can't laze about after all, huh?" she said.

Her face was bright red. *Wait, don't go back to normal just like that!* I thought.

"No, uh! That's not what I meant!" I said.

Ajisai-san hid her face in her hands and shook. "I'm sorry, I'm causing such a fuss. I just kind of wondered if I could get away with it. Oh, but I know I can't. I mean, I'm in high school already. I'm a good 158 cm tall. I can't be doted on in the same way my little brothers always are."

Oh no! My half-assed older-sistering had made Ajisai-san ashamed of herself! At this rate, she would fall into total despair!

“That’s not true at all!” I insisted. “Here, c’mon. There, there! There, there, there, there.”

I grabbed her head and ruffled her hair. If it took some embarrassment on my part to make Ajisai-san feel better, then I would have happily died of mortification. *Come on, maternal instincts, wake up!* I railed at myself.

“You’re so cute!” I told her. “Ajisai-chan, you’re just adorable. How old are you now?”

“Fifteen…”

“What was that? You said you’re five? And you already know how to say how old you are? That’s wonderful! What a good kid you are. The best kid in the world!”

She whimpered a little as I lavished her in affection but then accepted it anyway. This was one of those things where whoever snapped back to reality first lost out, I think. Man, I don’t know.

“W-would you like to play with Oneechan a bit, Ajisai-chan? Oh, how about we watch a video? What kind of videos do you like? How about a bonfire video?”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Oh, you haven’t heard of them? It’s just a video of regular old logs burning, but it helps you relax.”

I pulled my arm out of the futon and reached for my phone as Ajisai-san looked perplexed. *Huh*. I guess some people really didn’t know about these things. I watched them all the time whenever I wanted to turn my brain off.

Anyway, we had a problem here. If Ajisai-san didn’t want to watch the bonfire video, that left me with nothing else to talk about.

But wait! I did still have two topics left on that list my dear friend Satsuki-san had given me. There was no good reason not to bust out either one of them here, as I had complete faith in Satsuki-san’s topic selection.

All righty then, let me see, I thought. Time to pop open that third file.

When did you have your first time? it read.

“Damn you, Koto Satsuki!” I cried.

I startled Ajisai-san as I lurched upright, clenching my firsts. “Huh, what’s wrong?” she asked, covering her mouth with her sleeve.

I waved at her in a “nothing, nothing” gesture. “Oh, she just sent me kind of a weird text. That’s all.”

“What’d it say?” she asked.

“Oh, uh. Um. You’ll understand when you’re older, Ajisai-chan!”

She mumbled something vaguely. This chill little sister mode of hers was really cute. How was I supposed to ask her *that* when she looked like this? *Pant, pant. Creepy giggle.* “When did you have your first time?”

I was going to floor Koto Satsuki. You really couldn’t let your guard down around her for a minute, not with the way she’d slipped that sudden question in with all the others. Wait, but what if she thought I liked talking about that sort of thing? After all, she seemed to be under the impression that I was some kind of total perv.

And besides, Ajisai-san didn’t have a body count. Nope. She was five, for Pete’s sake. She couldn’t have had one… Right? Oh god, now I was starting to worry.

“Hey, Ajisai-chan,” I said.

“Hmm?”

She looked at me with innocent eyes, and I flashed her a sunny smile. Yeah, there was no way I could ask her Satsuki’s question!

“You mentioned a bit ago that you’d like to try cosplaying, right? Why don’t we look at some cosplayers on Twitter?”

I forced myself to laugh to mask the awkwardness and then hid my screen from her as I searched; there was a good chance that images too inappropriate for a five-year-old might pop up.

The little tyke at my side said, “Ooh, cute!” as she watched a cat video on her own phone. *No,* you’re *the cutie,* I told her mentally. *You’d beat the cat 10 to 0.*

I started hunting for cosplayer photos on Twitter. While I never purposefully looked for that, they sometimes came across my timeline anyway. I always thought the costumes were epic. Did they make those

things themselves? Ajisai-san was handy with a needle and thread, so maybe she could make her own too.

As I looked through them attentively, the image of a random cute girl leaped out at me. Her handle was Nagipo@TeenCosplayer. Her big eyes and baby face made her seem like she'd come straight out of a fictional world. She had tons of followers too.

I tapped on her account and saw that she'd put up her latest tweet no more than twenty minutes ago. There was a photo of Nagipo-san and, next to her, another girl dressed as a magical girl revealing an alarming amount of skin. Damn, that other girl was smoking hot. Sexy with a capital S.

…Wait a minute. I frowned. The caption said, "Collab with my buddy Moon-chan! Creamy Nage cosplay," but wasn't that…

…Satsuki-san? Wait, hold up. And that girl next to her, Nagipo-san, wasn't that—

Just then, my phone rang. *And it was Satsuki-san calling.*

Eep! She was going to kill me!

"Whoa! R-Renako-oneechan?" Ajisai-chan asked.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," I said. "Satsuki-san's calling, so I'm going to step out and take this!"

I crawled out of the futon and went across the room to the window before stealthily accepting the call.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"You saw it, I presume," she said.

Oh god. What was she, a monster?

"Uh. What're you talking about?" I bluffed. "I'm not sure what you mean. I don't even have a Twitter account."

"Ah. So you did see it," she said.

Seriously, how? Did she have hidden cameras on me? It wasn't just that I was so one-dimensional that she could guess my every move, right? Nah, it had to be telepathy.

"I'm sure you'll already know what will happen," she went on.

"You mean, if I spill the beans to someone else?"

"I won't hesitate," she said. "Know that even your family will

suffer."

"You sound like a diabolical villain," I groaned.

Then I tried to cheer her up to make her come to her senses. “I-it’s really okay, Satsuki-san. I mean, you looked great in the photo!”

The other end of the line was silent.

“Sorry.” The silence was so oppressive that I had no choice but to apologize.

Then I asked, “Um, why do you even cosplay in the first place if you seem to hate it this much?”

“It is written in the contract,” she said.

“The…contract? You mean, like, a magical girl contract?”

“I’m in no mood to explain further. At any rate, continue having fun with Sena, and block the Nagipo@TeenCosplayer account. That is all I have to say.”

The phone beeped as she hung up after laying down her terms.

She was being forced to cosplay because of a contract? What the heck? That made zero sense to me.

As she’d told me to block it, I didn’t follow the account but instead saved it in my bookmarks. I also made sure to download that image of Satsuki-san. At that moment, I had no idea that this was merely the beginning of a terrible tragedy. (To be continued!)

Then, as I drooled all over the Satsuki-san cosplay photos, a neglected five-year-old whined at me, “Hey, Renako-oneechan?”

“Oh, right.” I tottered back over to the futon, and Ajisai-san pulled me into another tight squeeze. She was really going ham with the skin contact today. My heart rate went haywire.

“What’d you and Satsuki-chan talk about?” she asked.

“Oh, uh. Nothing important,” I said. I mean, there wasn’t anything else I could say. If I showed her Satsuki-san’s cosplay photos, my family would pay the price.

“Hmmph!” Ajisai-san didn’t seem to want to take that for an answer as she pouted. Uh, excuse me?! “Is it a secret, Oneechan?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess…?”

She stared at me like she was begging me to tell. Look, she could make puppy-dog eyes all she wanted, but I still couldn’t tell! Ugh, what a mess I was in!

“I see,” she said. “It’s secret, huh? Just your little secret, yours and Satsuki-san’s…”

“She’s taken my family hostage!”

Ajisai-san turned her back to me and curled up into a ball like a baby as she watched her cat video. “Fine.” The guilt I felt staggered me.

“Hey, it’s not like that!” I protested. “Satsuki-san and I aren’t… you know!”

“What a cute kitty cat,” she said, ignoring me. “Meow! Meow!”

“I can tell you’re only pretending not to hear me! If you don’t listen to your sister, you’re a bad kid!”

Ajisai-san peeked back at me and mumbled, “Do you really think I’m a bad kid…?”

“No, not at all!” I cried. “Ajisai-chan, you’re the best kid in human history! There hasn’t been a single kid better than you in the last four million years!”

Ajisai-san folded in on herself even further and hugged her knees. “But Satsuki-chan’s more important to you, huh?”

“No!”

“But when she and Mai-chan were having their argument, you were being all nice to her…”

Oh god, what was I supposed to do about this? Maybe I could just be reckless and shout, “No, you’re more important to me than Satsuki-san!” But I mean, was it true…? If I had to compare Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san, which one came out on top? No, I couldn’t compare them. Both of them meant a lot to me, of course!

“I mean. Um. I…” I began.

This wasn’t like before, when she’d been having fun messing with me. It was like she was being confronted with a fact that even she didn’t want to acknowledge.

She was always confined to that position of being Sena Ajisai.

She lowered her eyes and muttered, her lips only moving slightly, “Renako-oneechan, do I come first in your book?”

“I-I mean.”

Come first in my book? In what way? Like, as friends? Or…

No, I was barking up the wrong tree. Ajisai-san wasn't looking for some logical answer. She just wanted the feeling of security that came from being the number one person in my heart. It was all a need for approval, I thought.

Seeing Ajisai-san, who was normally so well loved and so dependable, now weak before me tugged at my heartstrings. If all it took was a few words of encouragement to get her back on her feet, then I would have been happy to tell her as many times as it took, "You're number one in my book!" I really wanted to say that…but I just couldn't.

"Can you give me a hug, Renako-oneechan?" she asked.

"Y-yeah, sure."

She raised both arms, and I hugged her. Her lips grazed my cheeks, and my face turned red.

But I didn't know—what did it mean to be first in someone's book? Say Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san both needed help. Who would I reach out to first? After I considered it from multiple angles, my inclination was to go for Satsuki-san, because she seemed to have fewer friends. I mean, someone else would come along and help Ajisai-san since she had so many other pals, right? That's where my head was at. And that meant telling her, "You always come first with me, duh!" was just…a lie.

As I held her warm body against mine, I felt like our two hearts were beating together in sync.

"Rena-chan…" she said, like she was checking to see if I was still there.

"Ajisai-san," I responded.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. *Ah,* I thought.

"I'm guessing it's the inn lady coming to fold the futons," I said.

Ajisai-san made a little mewling noise.

"I imagine you want to stay in bed a little longer, huh, Ajisai-chan?" I asked. "I'll go tell her to hold off for a bit. You stay here."

She reluctantly let go of me and, lowering her eyes again, murmured, "I'm sorry for saying some weird things, Oneechan. Thanks for being nice to me."

“N-no problem.”

“I’ll be good and wait for you.”

Then she smiled like the cutest thing alive. It was such a charming smile that every person on earth would have fallen in love with her. But, for some reason I couldn’t put my finger on, it felt like she was forcing herself to do it. Man, I really didn’t get this any longer. I just felt utterly helpless.

I slowly rolled out of bed and set off for the continued knocking.

“Hello,” I said, as I opened the door. “Sorry, we’re actually still not up ye—”

It wasn’t the innkeeper.

“Why, hello there, Renako,” the person standing there said.

I almost felt like I could hear a wind chime noise, a big sha-la-la like a falling star. It looked like, and this is a conservative estimate, the most beautiful girl in the world was standing there with her blonde hair up in a ponytail. Her figure was so perfect it made you realize what God had been trying to do when he’d made humanity. At the very least, this was not someone you’d run into accidentally at an inn in these parts.

It was Oduka Mai.

“Agh!” I screamed. *“You look awfully familiar!”*

“Are you sure?” she said. “Because you know, my slogan for a while was that there’s no one else in the world like me.”

“It’s you,” I cried. “You!” I pointed an accusatory finger at her.

Mai laughed like something about this amused her. “It was rather mean of you to go on vacation and not tell me. Now, do you mind if I join you for a minute?”

“Wait, no, hold on!”

But there was no time to stop Oduka Mai before she waltzed right in.

Oh, this spelled disaster. Because inside my room was a very sleepy Ajisai-san still wrapped up in the futon!

“Renako-oneechan?” she called, a five-year-old with a too cute voice. “Hey, c’mon, hurry up and come back to bed. I wanna get another hug. C’moooon, come hug me.”

“Oh?” Mai said.

“Huh?” Ajisai-san said.

Baffled Mai and sleep-dazed Ajisai-san stared at each other. Then, a moment later, Ajisai-san screamed fit to wake the dead. I’d never heard a sound like that come from her mouth before.

“So,” I said, arms folded as I glared at Mai. “What’re you doing here?”

“I just thought I’d like to spend some time at the seaside,” she said.

“You filthy liar! You’re basically royalty. Even if you were traveling incognito, you wouldn’t stay at this dump of an inn if your life depended on it! And I’m sorry for calling it a dump!”

Mai sat on one of the chairs with her legs folded under her, drinking some tea she’d made herself just a minute ago and beaming away. “Why,” she said, “I’m glad to see you’re the same as ever. I was so surprised when I heard you and Ajisai had suddenly left together on a trip. Then, I decided to take a vacation myself and come after you.”

“Aha!” That solved the riddle of last night’s messages from my sister. Mai must have been asking her. Great, so she just followed orders from the supreme Mai, no questions asked?

“I can’t believe there’s a spy in my own family,” I groaned.

“Haruna is a lovely, dutiful kouhai,” Mai said. “I understand that she’s always longed to have a sister-in-law like me.”

“Aha. Win the family over, and that’s half the battle already.”

Sister-in-law, my ass. For the umpteenth time, I wasn’t marrying Mai.

The emotional moment I’d shared with Ajisai-san last night now felt like ancient history. It’d all been painted over and replaced by Mai’s world. Such was the power of the monarchy.

Speaking of Ajisai-san, after she’d folded up the futons, she sat down in a chair of her own and acted like nothing had happened. However, her ears were bright red. There was that embarrassment thing I was talking about earlier.

“Hello to you too, Ajisai,” Mai said. “This is the first time we’ve

happened to meet all summer, isn't it? How are you?"

"I-I'm doing okay…" Ajisai-san stammered.

"By the way, what was that 'oneechan' business I heard just a few moments ago?"

"Oh, uh!" Ajisai-san said. "Nothing, really!"

Ajisai-san was turning red as an apple again, so I butted in and wrestled the conversation to go in a different direction. "Oh hey, did you know? Ajisai-san used to come here when she was a little kid."

Mai picked up on this new conversation topic. "Oh, really now? It's a lovely, quiet little town. Do you know the area well, Ajisai?"

"S-sort of, yeah," she said. "I more or less know my way around."

"Then, would you be so kind as to show us the area? It's such fun to take a stroll around a new town. Of course, only if it's not a bother."

"Uh, I mean! Wh-what do you think, Ajisai-san?" I asked.

"G-good question!" she said. "Um, sure, I guess!"

She clapped her hands together as, sweat streaking down her face, she made a horribly desperate grin. Phew, thank god. I thought Ajisai-san was on the verge of a mental breakdown after our classmate walked in on that role-play of hers.

"Oh, but I wouldn't want to force you, naturally," Mai said. "We each have our own ideas of how to enjoy a vacation, after all. If you're not obliged, then how about Renako and I go out to see the sights? What do you think, Renako-oneechan?"

My vocal cords bypassed my brain and shrieked, "St-stooop!"

Ajisai-san turned bright red and shook all over. God, how much more torment would we get? What was this all about? Was Mai being mean to us because we'd gone on vacation together? Was that it? *Don't be mean, Mai,* I thought. *It's, well, mean.*

As I glared at her, Mai suddenly looked upset. "Oh, I apologize. I only felt a bit lonely, as it seemed like I had been left out. Of course, that's largely due to me being busy with work. It's my fault for being so hard to get in touch with."

"N-no, it's not," Ajisai-san said. "I'm sorry too, Mai-chan."

"No, you needn't apologize. This is merely an issue of me being

immature."

Mai looked despondent. This emotional honesty was one of her virtues.

Honestly, when I saw the two of them going back and forth like that, I felt like I just had to accept her request. Oh well. I'd let her come along.

"To be real with you," I said, "Ajisai-san was planning to go on this trip by herself, but I just invited myself along. So I'm not really any different than you, Mai…"

"Really?" said Mai. "In that case, can I ask once again if you'd allow me to join you?"

Finally, Ajisai-san busted out one of her sunny smiles. "Of course you can, Mai."

Mai's face lit up. Before Ajisai-san, even Mai was just a mortal human who could reach salvation through an angel.

With that settled, Mai half rose to her feet. "Now, we'd better get ready, hadn't we? I must confess that I booked the room next door. Say, Renako, where are you staying?"

She looked around the room.

"Where? …Uh, right here," I said.

"Hm?" Mai tilted her head, still smiling away. "Is this not Ajisai's room?"

"The two of us are sharing a room," Ajisai-san said. "We laid out our futons next to each other." There was a tone to her voice like, "Duh, isn't that blindingly obvious?"

Yet Mai froze. "…You two are sharing a room?" she repeated in a horrified whisper. What was her problem? "How obscene!"

"What's obscene about it?" I asked.

"Two girls! Sharing a room together!"

"Literally what are you going on about?!" I didn't get what she was driving at in the slightest.

"You!" she cried. "I can't believe you would do something like this with…! With anyone!"

"Not anyone," I insisted. "I've only ever spent the night with

Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san."

"You spent the night with her too?!" Mai cried.

"You and Satsuki-chan?" Ajisai-san chimed in. Huh?! Not her jumping into the fray too!

Guys, it was just a sleepover between friends. Totally everyday, right? I mean, well, not *every* day exactly. In fact, it was rather impressive that I'd reached such a high point where I could consider sleepovers as totally commonplace. In that sense, yes, I was guilty as charged… *Heh heh*… Wait, this really wasn't the right moment to start trembling in joy.

Mai placed a hand on her chest and declared, as grandly as if she were running for class president, "Very well. Tonight, I shall sleep in this room too."

"But you literally just said you rented the room next door," I pointed out.

"Why are you trying to exclude me?" she asked. "Is it because I'm too pretty? Does it hurt your eyes to look at me?"

"No, because it's written in the rental agreement!"

This freaking supadari. Nothing I said would register in that head of hers. See, she'd even put Ajisai-san at a loss for words.

"Hey, Ajisai-san!" I said. "A little help here? Talk some sense into Mai for me, would you?"

Just then, Ajisai-san, who had been observing our whole argument, seemed to pick up on something. "Huh?" she said. "Did you just call her Mai?"

"Oops." True, I was supposed to call her Oduka-san.

Beethoven's Fifth started playing in my head. I was doomed.

"Oh, uh. That's because. Um. Uh!" I said. The more flustered I became, the more trouble I had getting the words out. "So, we have this thing called being friends with Renafits."

"What are Renafits?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Um, well. You see. It's. Um. It's a long story!"

I had no idea about what to disclose or how to go about talking about it, so I started babbling so disjointedly she couldn't even get the

gist of what I was saying. I couldn't tell her about Mai's secrets, and like hell was I going to admit that Mai and I had tried dating for a time. But at the same time, I couldn't lie to Ajisai-san! I was trapped on all sides! *Help me, Do-Mai-emon!* I thought.

"What she's trying to say," Mai helpfully supplied, "is that we've been close friends for a little while now. But you know how shy Renako is. She said she wasn't comfortable dropping the honorifics on my name in front of other people, so she's still been calling me Oduka-san in public."

What a concise, easily understandable explanation. Wait, was that all I needed to say?!

Ajisai-san slowly turned the words over in her mind. "O-oh, I see," she said. "I was just surprised to hear your name out of the blue like that."

She understood! Oh, thank god. I was saved.

"See, Renako?" Mai said. "Now, why don't we use this opportunity and have you start calling me Mai at school too?"

"No freaking way! I'm way too scared of the looks people'll give me."

"Oh, really? I doubt anyone would even care," she said.

"Ajisai-san, what do you think?" I asked.

"Um… I think you have a point, Renako," she said. "I think you'd kind of have to be brave to drop Mai-chan's honorifics."

"I don't mind if you call me Mai either, Ajisai," Mai said. She took Ajisai-san's hand with a smile.

Faltering ever so slightly, Ajisai-san stuttered out, "…M-Mai."

"Exactly, Ajisai."

Ajisai-san flushed bright red. "I-I think I'm a bit too shy for that," she said. "Besides, you feel like a Mai-chan to me."

"Do I really?"

"Yeah. You're all princessy and feminine, and yet you're still my close friend. So you're Mai-chan."

"So should I call you Ajisai-chan moving forward?" Mai suggested.

"Th-that's a little embarrassing too," Ajisai-san said.

They smiled at each other gently like a couple touring their wedding venue in advance. *Get a load of this, MaiAji fans,* I thought. We had a wedding reception for two beautiful girls unfolding right before our eyes.

As I played the role of the staff member watching on from afar, Mai stood up with a smile.

"With that," she said, "shall we head out now?"

I hadn't been sure how things would go down when Mai first showed up and barged her way in, but now I saw that it was just going to be like any other friend group hangout. That was part of what made Mai such a great person.

"Sure," I said.

"Sounds good to me!" Ajisai-san agreed.

It was actually a very good idea. Had I spent the whole day playing at being Ajisai-san's sibling, my brain probably would have melted, making me lose my entire command of Japanese in the process.

Thus, we started day two of our trip by heading out from the inn to walk around town.

This town was super close to the mountains, so the roads were really hilly. Some of the slopes were so steep, it felt like full on hiking. I was getting a real workout here.

I climbed up one slope and was treated with a wide, awe-inspiring view of the ocean before me. I probably would have grown bored with the sight had I lived here, but to me, this scenery was a rare, exciting treat.

Ajisai-san and Mai walked in front of me, side by side, while I trailed just a little behind. I often followed a step or two behind the others whenever we went out as a group, since I didn't want to take up the whole sidewalk and bother other people. That's a totally normal thing people do, right? Right?

"To be honest," Ajisai-san said, "there really isn't anything to do around here."

"Really?" said Mai.

"Yeah. I used to come here on summer or winter break sometimes.

But I didn't have any friends, so I always ran out of stuff to do. I'd just wander around all over the place."

The sunlight was going easy on us today, but Mai still carried a white lace parasol to keep off the sun. She looked like a noble lady out on a stroll, every bit of her elegant and gorgeous. It was kind of awesome how she seemed to exude a professional sense of beauty.

"Back then, my brothers were just babies, and my parents had their hands full with them. That's why they shoved me aside and sent me here," Ajisai-san went on.

"I see," Mai said. "I suppose that makes this your home away from home."

Ajisai-san giggled. "Yeah, maybe. Sorry for dragging you both along on this trip down memory lane." She looked back at me with a grin.

"Oh, don't worry about it," I said, shaking my head.

Mai, on the other hand, smiled back. "What do you mean? This is exactly what I wanted. It's lovely to spend time forging stronger friendships."

As opposed to my shoddy response, Mai's smooth comeback completely lightened the mood. No wonder we all called her the supadari of Ashigaya High. It was actually a huge relief to have Mai around on Ajisai-san's runaway vacay. Had it just been the two of us, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't have stood a chance of going anywhere. We would have just spent the whole day in bed. So having Mai around was great…but also, she was kind of driving me up the wall!

"So, where are we heading to now?" Mai asked.

Ajisai-san giggled again. "Good question. Where do you think? Here's a hint: it's somewhere that I used to spend my allowance on when I was back in elementary school."

"Let me see," Mai mused. "An art museum?"

What kind of little kid uses their piddly allowance to go to an art museum? It sounded like something some hotshot artist would do.

Ajisai-san giggled some more. "And what's your guess, Rena-chan?"

"Uh, um, uh. Like, an arcade or something?" I asked.

I really, really wanted to be right, so I tried a safe bet. I knew Ajisai-san better than Mai did!

But Ajisai-san looked bashful and went, “Close, but not quite.” Oh, that was too cute. “We’re almost there.”

“So an arcade was close?” Mai said. “What could it be, then? An amusement park?”

“Wait, did Odaiba Plaza used to be located around here back then?”

“I think that’d be a *little* out of this town’s budget,” Ajisai-san said. Her joking rebuttal made me feel great.

As we horsed around saying whatever came into our heads, we arrived. “Uh, h-here it is,” she said.

It sat on a street corner. Below the rusty sign that had clearly been standing there for a long time was a shop storefront jam-packed to overflowing with goodies. It looked even more crowded than a convenience store.

I exclaimed in surprise, “It’s a dagashi shop! An old-fashioned snack store!”

Oh shit. It was a relic straight out of the Showa era! This was my first time ever seeing one in person outside of manga or movies. In my area, the only places kids could go to buy candy and snacks were convenience stores or supermarkets and stuff. But this was incredible.

“I guess they haven’t pulled it down yet,” Ajisai-san said, putting a hand to her chest in relief.

“Oh my god,” I said. “A legit dagashi shop. I gotta take a picture!”

My excitement made Ajisai-san look proud. She crossed her arms behind her back and grinned at Mai.

“So?” Ajisai-san teased. “What do you think? I bet you’re too fashionable and hoity-toity to know much about dagashi shops, huh?”

Mai chuckled boldly. “Alas, Ajisai. You’ve forgotten that Satsuki and I grew up together. She taught me all about how to have fun without breaking the bank, and, naturally, dagashi shops were a core feature of this education.”

“No way.” Ajisai-san’s eyes grew wide.

I jumped on the bandwagon and added, “That’s impossible. You

look like you'd see a hamburger and go, 'But how am I supposed to eat this without a knife and fork?'"

I feel like I should mention, by the way, that Mai and I had gotten hamburgers after school together before. She ate them like anyone else did.

Still smiling all the while, Mai folded up her parasol. "Satsuki taught me well. I know how to choose the best snacks to have an after-school feast on only 100 yen. I'm quite fond of the chips they sell, myself."

"Incredible!" I said. I was the only one left out right now, but since Ajisai-san and Mai were having such fun, it didn't matter to me.

Ajisai-san suddenly made a fist and then pointed right at Mai. "Okay, Mai-chan!" she yelled. "Let's have a match to see who can pick out a better selection of treats on 100 yen."

"Oh ho," Mai said. "I'll take you up on that. Renako, would you be the judge?"

"Huh, me?" I said.

"Uh-huh," said Ajisai-san. "Now, let the Ultimate Dagashi Showdown begin!"

Sparks flew as the two happily set off. Mai, at least for the time being, seemed content to go along with Ajisai-san. But, when I thought about how Kaho-chan—heck, even Satsuki-san—probably would have taken her up on the competition offer too, I realized that maybe social butterflies were just down to go along with things in general. And that meant that I, newly emerged from my social chrysalis as I was, needed to get good at going with the flow too. I couldn't just be like, "Oh, sorry, I don't know all that much about dagashi."

All right, then. I nodded with as much authority as if I was the world's top expert on the stuff. "Leave it to me," I said. "I'll have you both know that I have a real discerning taste for snacks. If you blindfold me and make me eat a chip, I can tell you eight times out of ten whether it's reduced sodium or consommé flavored."

"I mean, I'm pretty sure I can too," Ajisai-san said, shooting me down yet again. Agh, it made me so happy that she was joking with me like this.

At any rate, I followed the other two inside the crowded shop.

Every nook and cranny was overflowing with snacks I'd never seen before in my life. It was a really little place and kind of cute. It felt like I'd wandered into a candy factory in a children's storybook world, like the cheap-o snack section at the supermarket but more kinda…you know. Like, nostalgic, I guess? Whatever it was, I think it was written into my DNA.

Ajisai-san picked up an itty-bitty shopping basket and wandered the store, beaming away and going, "Ooh, I used to get that all the time."

"Ajisai-san," I said, "did you know you make the same kind of face whenever you go shopping anywhere? You remind me of that one time we went to the department store to buy makeup, or when we go to the general store."

"Oh, really?" she said. "Do I look weird?"

I shook my head as she patted her cheeks. "No, it's not that. It's really nice, like, uh… It feels like you're the same wherever you go."

"It's nice? Well, that's good, then."

She flashed me a grin and a pair of peace signs. Such a cute girl picking out these tiny snacks in a dagashi shop like this was the *height* of cuteness.

"You know," she went on, "I really love being able to pick these out from such a big selection. It's so nice when you have so many options that it's hard to choose."

"Hey, how about these, Ajisai-san?" I offered. "Chocolate sticks are good, right?"

"Sure," she said. "Or I could get this chocolate that only costs 25 yen, allowing us to try a whole bunch of other flavors too."

"Oh, I see! You're the snack master!"

Meanwhile, Mai sized up each piece individually, looking as serious as a stock trader. As she planned out her perfect selection of goodies, I heard her mutter, "Aha. I've never tried this before." Wait, was she *that* absorbed just imagining all the things she wanted to eat?

But you know, there was something interesting about all of this. Had I come to this town on my own, I probably would have been too embarrassed to be wandering around a dagashi shop as a high schooler. But when I was with Mai and Ajisai-san, three high schoolers popping

in at a dagashi shop felt like a fun, youthful experience, a part of a summer to remember! I wondered why that was. I guess maybe because the other two were so elegant. Whenever I was with them, I felt like we were on the set for some TV drama.

As Mai hunted for her snacks of choice, I asked her, “What sort of snacks do you typically eat?”

And wait, did Mai snack to begin with? I couldn’t really picture her chowing down on food between meals, although I guess people were always giving her Pocky and stuff at school.

“I’m a fan of Big Katsu and other sorts of junk food,” she said.

“Wait, are you literally just reading off the thing you have in your hand?!”

I’d have been shocked if Mai actually chowed down on Big Katsu every day in that living room of hers. Actually, on the flip side, it kind of fit. I could definitely picture Mai eating dagashi with a ramune bottle in one hand. Mai had those moments too, right?

“Well, I was kidding about that,” she said. “But I mainly eat the snacks that are delivered to our house.”

“They ship snacks to your house?!” I said. “Like, Choco Pies and everything?”

“No, not Choco Pies. The people we do business with send us trendy sweets from famous stores and the like. I’d love to eat them all, but it’s impossible with such a quantity. So I send them home with the servants before they go bad.”

“Wow,” I said.

“I feel bad that I’m always leaving some left over, so I’m always too guilty to go out and buy any more snacks on top of that. That’s why something like this is such fun.” She closed her eyes, beaming, and chuckled.

Had Ajisai-san known all this? Was that why she challenged Mai to a dagashi contest? I didn’t know, but I *did* know it wasn’t because she wanted to grind Mai into the dust and make her taste defeat. That was more of a Satsuki-san thing, after all.

Mai and Ajisai-san were pretty puzzling. I wondered how they actually felt about each other. From appearances alone, they made a picture-perfect image of a couple who had been together for years, but I

didn't think that was quite right.

Eventually, they both finished up choosing their selections. After they paid the old lady at the cash register, we went outside. There was a bench conveniently right in front of the shop, so we sat down like three cats soaking up the sun.

"Okay, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said. "Here's the candy I picked out."

Quick as a flash, she presented her plastic bag to me with three snacks inside.

"Marshmallows, chips, and a kind of cotton candy that pops in your mouth," she announced.

Ah yes, a very fitting selection for Ajisai-san. (Maybe? I'm talking out of my ass here.)

"Some sweetness, some saltiness, and then round it all off with a final shock of sugar—that's my strategy to sway you to my side," she announced, grinning with confidence. It was rare to see her look so self-assured. This silly thing, and the fact that it meant Ajisai-san had bounced back from the low self-esteem of yesterday, moved me more than this presentation of goodies that she'd poured her heart and soul into. Good. It was nice to see her this way. I guess my older sister act was worth it after all. Maybe?

Then, Mai said, "Oh my." She sounded surprised. "I see. How interesting."

"Hm?" I said.

"What is?" Ajisai-san asked.

"Look." Mai opened her bag and revealed four snacks: a ramune candy, a little yogurt-looking thingy you ate with a spatula, marshmallows, and chips.

Mai and Ajisai-san looked at each other and then burst into laughter.

"Jinx!" Ajisai-san said.

"Exactly."

Their laughter was contagious. We were so horribly amused that we turned into a three-person gang of high school girls, laughing and loitering in front of the dagashi shop.

Finally, Mai exhaled deeply. “Oh well,” she said. “I suppose we’ll have to call it a draw.”

“What a bummer,” Ajisai-san said. “And here I thought I’d beat you.”

Oh?

“I never imagined you’d be so competitive,” Mai said.

I nodded. Sure, we had a ping-pong match back at the hot spring, but that was because I’d forced her into it. I always thought Ajisai-san was the least competitive person in the world.

“Huh, why’re you surprised? I can get plenty competitive or salty. For instance—”

She was about to bring up the time she’d thrown her tantrum or turned into a five-year-old when she suddenly stopped short.

“For instance… Well, that’s a secret,” I said.

“Oh, now I’m interested,” Mai said. It was more obvious when she went up against Satsuki-san, but I had a feeling that Mai found it entertaining when people stepped up to challenge her.

Mai looked like she was going to inquire further, but Ajisai-san said, “Nope, my lips are sealed!” and refused to budge. What with her obstinacy, she and Mai were equally matched. But it was all just teasing, just playful “Come on, say it”s and “Nuh-uh”s. It was incredible, and since Mai and Ajisai-san were the ones doing it, I loved it. God, if only I could hang around both of them forever, so we could always feel this happy and fulfilled.

Suddenly, I heard a voice go, “My, what do we have here?”

Without thinking, my head whipped around.

A chubby middle-aged man was looking at us in surprise. Oh no, had he discovered Mai’s identity or something…? He didn’t look like he was here to hit on us, but I couldn’t be sure.

I was halfway off the bench and ready to dash out of there when he said, “Do my eyes deceive me, or is this little Ajisai-chan?”

“Huh?” Ajisai-san jumped too, but then she seemed to recognize him a moment later. “Wait, are you…Suzuki-ojisan?”

She explained that she used to talk with him back when she used to vacation here. They then had a conversation which was a whole lot

of “Wow, look how big you’re getting!” and “It’s been too long!” I didn’t know the guy at all, so I was entirely too timid to talk, but they both seemed to be having a grand time.

“Suzuki-ojisan runs a photography studio,” Ajisai-san told us. “He took photos for all the kids here for Shichi-Go-San and other holidays.”

“I remember all the children I’ve photographed,” the ojisan said, “but especially you, Ajisai-chan, because you were the cutest one of all. Are these your friends? Why, you’re all quite lovely young ladies.”

I forced myself to grin and chuckle awkwardly.

The conversation barreled on in a friendly way. And then it led to us being invited to see the studio! Ajisai-san said, “I want to see my old photos,” and Mai followed that up with, “Oh yes, that sounds interesting.” And then, at that point, there was no use in fighting it.

“Oh, but is that okay with you, Rena-chan?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Huh?! Of course! Totally fine by me! C’mon, let’s go. Let’s get a move on!!”

No matter what else I might have done, being around some random old guy wouldn’t make me faint. I mean, if it did, how was I supposed to ever take the train?

Um… Also, did he really have pictures of Ajisai-san at Shichi-Go-San? God! I wanted to see them so badly!

His place was a photo studio in the downtown area and less than a five-minute walk up the hill from the dagashi shop. The shop next door sold uniforms, and across from it was a beauty parlor. Half the stores in town had their shutters down. It was *that* kind of downtown area.

As we walked in, I oohed at all the portraits of weddings, coming-of-age ceremonies, family scenes, and little kids on Shichi-Go-San—the holiday where five-year-old and three-year-old boys and seven-year-old-girls get all gussied up in kimonos and go visit shrines—hanging on the walls.

With such an assortment, it should have been super hard to find the target of my interest. But I spotted her at once. After all, an older sister can never mistake the face of her younger sister, right? There she was, little kid Ajisai-san at age seven, all dolled up with a hairpin in her hair. She clutched a stick of chitose ame, the candy they give little kids

on Shichi-Go-San, and gave the camera a shy smile.

"She's so, so, so, so, so cuuuuuute…" I groaned.

"You're making me blush, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san whimpered feebly behind me as I devoured the photo with my eyes.

Man! She was so cute I was on the verge of hyperventilating.

"L-look," I said. "Don't get me wrong! I'm not into little kids, I swear! It's just that baby you is too powerful!"

"It was Shichi-Go-San, so wasn't she seven?" Mai helpfully corrected. *It's a figure of speech, Mai, okay?!* I thought.

I sighed. "I guess you've always been adorable, Ajisai-san…"

"I don't know about that. Jeez, this is really embarrassing." She fanned herself with her hand.

Oh god. Had this little Ajisai-chan asked me to stay in the futon with her, I would have gone and built a whole freaking empire in bed for her. I would have done anything for her.

But I swear I'm not into little kids! It's just because little kids look super cute so that adults will want to take care of them! You get me, right? (The above paragraph was delivered at a blistering clip.)

I mean, what other choice did I have? If they had baby Ajisai-san in front of them, anyone would be all over her, duh! (I'm lashing out in defense as I fight this losing battle.)

Oh, was I glad I'd chosen to run away from home with her! Thank you, God!

I lingered a bit too long in front of that photograph, so the photographer guy said, "Say, could I take another photo of you?"

"Sure thing," Ajisai-san said.

Despite my earlier shyness, I was fully on board with that idea in an odd sort of way. It'd be nice, right? The guy'd have baby Ajisai-san and teenage Ajisai-san right next to each other up on the wall of his photo studio. That's basically world peace, you know? (I have no idea what I'm saying anymore.)

But! Then the photographer guy looked at me. "Come on," he said. "You should join your friends since you have this special chance."

Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. I backed away with all my

might. Getting sandwiched between Ajisai-san and Mai was a baaad idea. I'd tank the photo's mean average quality.

But Ajisai-san clapped her hands together and said, "Yeah, that sounds great!"

What was I to do? *Please, Mai!* I thought. *Save me!*

As I turned my teary eyes to her, she gave a so-be-it sort of sigh. Then, in a voice so low only I could hear, she whispered, "But I really would have liked a photo with all three of us."

"A photo's fine!" I said. "But having it hang up on the wall of the studio for ages is another story!"

"My goodness," she said. She patted my head and smiled at me fondly. "You're getting so good at making me spoil you, you cute little thing."

I flushed bright red. Excuse me, wh-who was she calling spoiled?! Even without Mai around, I'd done my best with Ajisai-san, thank you very much! Me, spoiled? I wasn't *spoiled*! I was just, just still on my way to becoming a strong, independent social butterfly. I didn't *have* to beg Mai for help, not really. Grr, darn her! Was she even listening to me? I mean, I wasn't saying any of this out loud, but still!

"Well, then I suppose Ajisai-san and I can take this photo ourselves," she said.

I stamped my feet, filled with a sense of defeat. Grr! Ever since she'd shown up, I'd ended up relying on her against her better judgment. How I wished I could have taken it all back!

But with that being said, it was nice that Ajisai-san just went "Yeah, I get it" and backed down about the photo thing immediately. I would have straight-up died had she looked at me and made a "Huh? Why not?" kind of face. Ajisai-san didn't want to steal my life away from me. She was too nice. *Phew…* Crisis momentarily averted.

Ajisai-san and Mai arranged themselves in the studio proper against an illuminated white backdrop. The photographer guy stood in front of his fancy camera and peered through its finder.

"Oduka-san, do you have experience with posing for photography, by any chance?" he asked.

"Just a bit," she said. She smiled and struck a pose in a truly

breathtaking way. In the blink of an eye, we'd ended up back in Oduka Mai land, just like in the fashion show I'd watched the other day. Mai was way too powerful in front of a camera. Even Ajisai-san looked just like an ordinary girl when standing next to her. Dang, Mai was scary good.

After the guy took a whole bunch of photos of them like that, Ajisai-san and Mai came back over to me.

"Phew," Ajisai-san said. "I was so nervous."

"But that was rather fun as well, no?" Mai said.

"Y-yeah," I chimed in, giving my bystander's impression. "You both looked super cute!"

Mai smiled and said, "Thank you."

Ajisai-san looked shy and also gave me a tiny smile with her "Thanks."

As we looked around the studio, Ajisai-san looked like she was taking a trip down memory lane. "Oh yeah, I remember crying my eyes out here one time."

"Huh, really?" I said.

"Yeah, it was a whole big thing. Right, ojisan?"

The ojisan smiled wryly. "Ah, I know what you're referring to."

Even though it was close to ten years ago, I guess he still remembered it.

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After we left, we got a light meal before setting off back down the hill toward our inn. As we walked along, Ajisai-san said, "Back then, my parents had their hands full with my brothers, so they sent me alone to stay at my relatives' bed-and-breakfast. Then, one of my brothers came down with a fever on Shichi-Go-San, so they weren't with me even for that. It was just…ugh, whhhhhy? I'm pretty sure I threw a tantrum."

Ajisai-san had tried to pay the photographer, but he wouldn't hear of it. If anything, he said, the photo was his way of thanking her for letting him see her all grown up and doing well. He also said he'd send

her the photos later on.

“So when that happened,” Ajisai-san continued, “the photographer tried his hardest to calm me down. He said to me, ‘Let’s make you look so cute your parents will feel bad for leaving you alone.’ I really liked that idea, so I tried as hard as I could to be the cutest ever.”

The sea turned red as the sun set over town. It made for a beautiful view, albeit one so blindingly bright I shaded my eyes with my hand.

“That’s when he took that one photograph,” she said. “I’d been crying, even, but he covered it up with makeup. Gosh, I used to be so selfish. I wasn’t happy unless I could be first in everything, and it used to cause such a bother for everyone else.”

Ajisai-san stuck out her tongue. “Sorry, I feel like you guys keep having to see such weird parts of me.”

“You think?” I asked.

“Uh-huh.” She shot me a meaningful grin.

Sure, it might have been kind of embarrassing for her to show off all these various parts of herself over these past few days, but I was enjoying getting to know her better. Still, that would’ve been a pretty me-centric thing to say out loud. If Ajisai-san had seen my loser side and went, “But it’s okay, because I’m glad that I got to know you better,” I probably would’ve torn my stomach open.

I guess some people didn’t want to be honest with themselves about their true feelings. Even Mai had reservations about dropping her school persona, to the point that she refused to take off the mask. If even she couldn’t manage that, I guess people were complex creatures indeed.

Just as the inn came into view, Mai titled her parasol and suggested thoughtfully, “You know, today isn’t over yet, is it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Mai didn’t respond. Just then, I heard the sound of festival music carried in on the wind. Was there a festival going on somewhere? Oh yeah, come to think of it…

Ajisai-san looked like she’d just come to the same realization. It’d completely slipped my mind, but there was a local festival happening today.

Mai nodded. “I’ve been looking forward to this myself. We’re going, I presume?”

“Yeah!” Ajisai-san exclaimed, and I followed suit.

But was I up for a local festival? Well, since it was such a special occasion, I *did* want to see the two of them dress up in yukatas… But maybe that was too much of a good thing. I didn’t think I was mentally prepared enough to see that.

“I wonder if there’s a place to rent yukatas around here,” I said.

“How about we ask the innkeeper?” Ajisai-san suggested.

“O-okay,” I said. “That might be a good idea.”

If it meant I got to see Ajisai-san in a yukata, then I’d attempt talking to a complete stranger. And without Mai’s help this time, so there!

“Oh, that reminds me,” Mai said. She gave me That Grin—the “How should I shock the living daylights out of you today?” grin, the one she employed for Satsuki-san courtesy of her perfectly good intentions.

“My apologies,” she said. “I’ve already made arrangements for our yukatas.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Huuuuuuuh?”

We were in the room next to ours—that is, the room Mai had rented—and standing before a bunch of hanger racks filled with yukata after yukata. It almost looked like a yukata rental shop display in here.

Naturally, Ajisai-san was appalled—psych, just kidding. Actually, she exclaimed, “Wow! You’re the best, Mai!”

She oohed and aahed as she looked through all the different fabrics. Had she really adapted that fast?

“I borrowed these from my usual hotel,” she said. “I’ll return them all once we’re done, so please feel free to pick out whichever one you like.”

“Whoa, do you mean you got all these for free?” Ajisai-san asked.

“That’s right. Or rather… It’s more like something they do for

regulars. Like a free dessert after your meal."

"Amazing…I had no idea this kind of thing even existed. Okay, Mai-chan, don't mind if I do!"

"Either way, they're for all of us to wear." Mai giggled. "You're quite welcome."

I trembled as I watched this conversation go down. It'd taken me a whole ping-pong match to get Ajisai-san to split the bill with me, but now look at this! But I guess Mai was fundamentally on a different level than me. Yes, I know it was the height of presumptuousness to be salty about this, but by god was I salty! If only I had 50 trillion yen too!

"Go ahead, Renako," Mai said. "Please pick out whichever one you'd like."

"I won't lose to you, Mai!" I vowed. "Ajisai-san will be mine in the end, I swear! Don't think this means you've won!"

She frowned. "I see," she said. "I was so hoping we could all wear yukatas and go to the festival, but…I fear you aren't very happy about it."

"I'm freaking *thrilled*!" I said. "I can't wait to see you and Ajisai-san in yukatas!"

Nope, I couldn't do it. For a second there, I was on the verge of becoming literal scum for lambasting Mai when she'd only wanted to make us happy. *Ugh, piss off, shameful feelings! Scram!* Although, if my shameful feelings scrammed, I had a feeling that'd do away with me in the process as well.

Anyway, I put that aside for the time being and turned my attention to the yukatas. Calmly, mind you. The sheer selection of colors and fabrics made my girlish heart skip a beat. (Calmly, mind you.)

"Which should I go for?" I asked myself.

At times like this, I usually favored whatever looked good on my sister over any of my own actual preferences. Our faces were similar enough, and I think we had the same color thingy—blue base? Yellow base? Home base?—well, whatever that crap was. I was never that far off when I followed her lead.

Speaking of actual preferences… They all leaned toward cute things, things that would look good on Ajisai-san. But hey, what can

you do about it, am I right? Ajisai-san was my ideal girl, after all! Right? Great, now I felt really embarrassed all of a sudden. *Here, hurry up and pick out a yukata,* I thought. Right, right. Not something that was to my *taste*, something that looked *good on me*.

Just then, a voice right behind me asked, "Are any of these to your liking?"

"Whoa!" I cried, almost jumping out of my skin. I hadn't noticed her up until now, but there was a woman next to the hanger racks who did the exact opposite of standing out.

"H-Hanatori-san," I said.

Well, of course she'd be here. Mai couldn't possibly have set this up all by herself.

"A pleasure to see you again," said Hanatori-san. "Please, don't mind me."

She folded her hands together and bowed slightly, her face competently expressionless. She still looked as perfectly beautiful as she always had, like an android.

Then, she whispered, "After all, I will also pretend you're not here."

"Huh?" Did I just hear that right? "Um, hey, what was that…?"

"Oh, never you mind, you venomous pest."

"Wait, hello?!" Why was Mai's servant treating me like a bug?

I looked over my shoulder, but Mai and Ajisai-san were too engrossed in happily picking out their yukatas. I-I couldn't interrupt them! I shuddered at the formidable foe of Hanatori-san, she who had suddenly sunk her fangs into me.

"D-did I, uh. Did I do something?" I asked.

"Oh, no, nothing in particular," she said.

"Then why am I a venomous pest…? I mean, I don't think you're the type to say that to everyone, are you?"

"I can't imagine anyone could and still function in society," she said as she leered at me.

Yeah, I know! I thought. *So why on earth did you insult me like that?*

"Back when I first met you with Satsuki-san, I thought you were a

perfect lady…" I said.

The serious look on her face twitched. I had no idea she was this malevolent. Oh, but come to think of it, she *had* teased Satsuki-san. So there had been signs.

As she looked away, Hanatori-san mumbled, "That was because Koto-sama is to be my future mistress, you see."

A faint smile played across her face, one that seemed to come straight from the heart.

…Wait, what? Future mistress?

"What, did she make a promise with you that she'll hire you on if she ever gets loaded—I mean, rich?" I asked, backpedaling as I realized I'd almost talked to her like she was a kid my age.

Hanatori-san put a hand to her mouth and blushed. "No, nothing of the sort," she said. "I mentioned that because Koto-sama is to marry the young mistress."

"Wait, are you a rabid Mai × Satsu fangirl?!"

Was *that* the reason she was so cold to me? Because Mai's crush on me put me in the way of her ship? Come on, that wasn't my fault!

"Now, venomous pest swarming to the flowers, which yukata would you prefer?" she asked. "Would you perhaps like to try this mini yukata? Its hem is so short your underwear will be completely visible."

"Why on earth would I wear that?" I shouted. "It's clearly made for toddlers!"

Mai heard me and came over. "What's the matter, Renako?" she asked. "Are you having trouble choosing one?"

I considered tattling on Hanatori-san, but at the very last second, I decided to show true grit by putting up with it. So I just gritted my teeth instead.

And as I grit, grit, gritted away, I said, "H-Hanatori-san was… helping me pick out a yukata."

Hanatori-san must have been the closest person to Satsuki-san and Mai as she watched them grow up. Compared to Satsuki-san, I really was a rookie and a "venomous pest." I just wish she could have chosen a different set of words!

"Oh, I see," Mai said. "Hanatori has a brilliant aesthetic sense, so I

often ask her for help too. Hanatori, please dress her gorgeously."

"As you wish, mistress," Hanatori-san answered with a polite bow.

She then came over to me and, sounding rather surprised, said, "You've accepted that you're a vile pest? I see. You really are after her money."

"I'm really not!" I protested.

There were so many things I wanted to say, but for now, I figured I'd start with just the one thing. Okay, scratch that. Two things, actually.

"Mai and I aren't even dating," I told her, "so there's no way I'm in it for the money."

"I'm afraid I don't care," she said. She basically wasn't even listening. Her tone was so cold it was like ice, utterly devoid of any friendliness. "The young mistress is absurdly busy, yet she made her schedule free for one day just for you. Please do not betray her generosity."

"B-betray her generosity?" I repeated.

I mean, even if this wasn't a very nice way of putting it, Mai had gotten it into her own head to do this for me. I was happy about that and all, but…

I glanced over at Mai. I started feeling uneasy, remembering that glamorous side of her I'd seen at the fashion show. It went without saying, but all the same—Mai really did live in a whole other world.

"But that's why," I said, "I can't just, you know. Flatter and fawn over her, right? I'm just doing the best I can to be her friend."

Hanatori was silent. Gah. Why didn't she say anything? What was with this sense of foreboding?

It was only a matter of time before I folded before her icy glare, rolling over and showing her my stomach in apology like the dog I was, but before I got to that point, Hanatori-san selected one of the yukatas close at hand.

"What do you think of this one?" she asked.

It was a cute, sky-blue yukata, and I was sure my sister would have loved it. I guess Hanatori-san intended to carry out her orders after all.

So she wouldn't misunderstand my choice, I bowed and mumbled, "Yes, please," in a voice so quiet it was almost drowned out by the air conditioner.

"Then next," she said, "we'll choose an obi. May I recommend this one?"

Oh god, my stomach hurt…

In addition to this being my first time ever picking out a yukata, it was my first time ever really putting one on (and it was like donning a suit of armor). Once I was done, I went outside.

Agh, I could barely move my legs in this thing, and I wobbled on my geta sandals. *I can hardly move,* I thought. *Is that what wearing a yukata is like?* I looked super cute, but I had no idea that so much effort was required behind the scenes for this cuteness. And what was I supposed to do if I needed to go to the bathroom? I guess I wouldn't buy too many drinks at the festival.

It was awfully dark outside, and the festival music was louder than it was before. I held a drawstring bag with my phone and wallet in it as I waited for Ajisai-san and Mai. As Hanatori-san was the only one around to help us get ready, we had to do it in turns.

The old lady receptionist passed me as I waited out in front of the inn. "Oh my!" she said. "What a beautiful young lady we have here."

I giggled. I'd borrowed a hair clip to pin my hair up shorter than normal. Heh heh.

The old lady informed me that I looked adorable, and I denied it. No, but I really was, she insisted.

Maybe it was just because wearing a yukata felt so out of the ordinary, but I managed to chat with the old lady without getting nervous. She kept telling me that Tokyo girls were built differently and other compliments in a similar vein. Heh heh heh.

Just then, someone called my name.

"Oh, Ajisai-san, Mai!" I called back. I raised my hand to wave but then stopped short.

"Sorry we took so long," Ajisai-san said. "We were having our hair done too."

“What do you think, Renako?” Mai asked. “Do we look nice in these yukatas?”

“Look nice” wasn’t cutting it. I was about bowled over.

Ajisai-san had on a lovely yukata with a white base patterned with purple hydrangeas. She also wore a pin in her hair with dangling streamers that swayed when she walked. The obi was tied in a bow, making it look like a butterfly resting on a flower. It was a beautiful yukata on Ajisai-san, as lovely a flower as her namesake.

In contrast, Mai wore a brilliant scarlet yukata as vivid as the leaves in fall. Her obi was tied differently than Ajisai-san’s too, nice and tight around her waist. She displayed such perfect, flawless beauty I could almost *hear* the elegance. Her long hair was braided and half-up in a dazzling arrangement. Yet, at the same time, her collar also dipped rather low in the back, displaying a hint of skin that was beyond sensual.

My mouth fell open. (The old lady’s did too.)

“H-holy shit,” I said.

“Like a work by Michelangelo…” the old lady breathed.

The oh-my-freaking-god factor only increased as they came over. When I looked at them up close, all the gorgeous little details—heck, I didn’t even know how to do that hairstyle—blew me away. Had Hanatori-san done all this? What, did she actually work in a beauty parlor and only moonlighted as Mai’s servant?

Ajisai-san grinned at me. “I love your yukata. You look so cute.”

“Oh. Uh. Thank you…”

“Hey, how do I look?” she asked.

“I-it looks perfect on you… You’re an angel.” (Said in a teeny-tiny voice.)

Ajisai-san giggled. “Yay.”

On the other side of me, Mai flashed me a handsome smile. “And what about me, Renako?”

“Y-you’re very pretty…” (Also said in a teeny-tiny voice.)

Mai chuckled. “Thank you. Why, it’s lovely to go to a festival in the company of such pretty young ladies.”

I squeaked.

As Ajisai-san and Mai flanked me, I bowed to the old lady and told her we were leaving. As we walked away, I could hear her mumble behind me, “Wait, who was that other girl?”

That’d be me: the chameleon girl Amaori Renako, blending in with the pack of extroverts.

We passed row upon row of paper lanterns as we walked up the hilly street. I’d finally calmed down from the attack of Mai and Ajisai-san in yukatas and now felt nothing but pure excitement. As we got closer, the music got even louder. Then, when we turned the corner, we saw the festival.

“Wow!” I exclaimed.

Stalls lined the roadway on both sides of us. I couldn’t begin to tell you what this festival was for, but it sure was a festival all right. Since it was summer vacation, there was quite a crowd—whole families, couples, and groups of friends milling around, many of them in yukatas.

We joined the throng and walked around looking at the various stalls.

“Hey, what’s that?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Super ball scooping?” Mai said. “It looks fun. Let’s try it.”

“Wait, have you never been to a festival before, Mai?” I asked.

“I haven’t. They’re mostly held during the summer, aren’t they? I’m almost always overseas in summertime.”

I chuckled. “In that case, let me teach you all about how to have fun at a festival in return for showing me the dagashi shop! First, we have to start with super ball scooping.”

I mean, I’d hardly been to any festivals either, but whatever. The last time I’d been with my family, even, was right around when I started junior high. But this one looked like fun, so I grabbed Mai’s hand and pulled her over. Ajisai-san happily followed behind us.

Naturally, even the lantern light couldn’t drown out their incredible brilliance, so I kept trying to block them from watching eyes… But even that was fun. The three of us had a blast as we went around that festival. Maybe things would be different when school

started back up, but in that moment, I wanted the fun to never end. I mean, going around with friends at a festival was the quintessential extrovert thing, the exact thing I'd been so envious of that night in bed.

"Hey, want to get takoyaki next?" I said.

"Oh, I'd like to get a candy apple too," Ajisai-san said.

"Then why don't I buy us some cotton candy," Mai suggested, "and all three of us can share?"

That sounded great to me! We smiled at each other in agreement and then scattered.

I was having so much fun that it didn't even cross my mind there were things happening behind the scenes I was not privy to.

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I stood in line to buy two things of takoyaki, and when I came back to where the others should have been, I found no one there. Wait, where were we supposed to meet again? Oh, shoot! I was so amped up that I'd completely forgotten what we'd said! Was it here? Over there? Where was it?!

Okay, calm down, I told myself. I sent them a message. They'd notice it, I was sure. Well, maybe they would. God, I was so worried…

I stood rooted to the spot in the shade of the pillar, plastic bag in my hand. If either Mai or Ajisai-san had gotten lost, I could have picked them out from 100 km away by their brilliance. But the issue was that *I* was lost!

Aw man, I hoped they were both okay. Hopefully some weirdos hadn't come up and tried to make a pass at them. Wait, but since they were both together, would anyone actually try to come up to them? Sure, they were both girls, but they totally looked like a couple. Whenever they smiled away at each other, it was like they went off into their own little Mai × Aji world.

Ah, and that's why I was here all alone…and lonely. They hadn't even noticed that I had messaged them.

Well, if I was missing them, then they had to be missing me too! After all, I'd pledged to show them just how much fun festivals were,

and I had to honor that promise.

With my mind made up, I plunged into the crowd before my takoyaki could get cold.

***

Meanwhile, as Amaori Renako lost sight of where to meet her friends, Ajisai came up to the meeting place, candy apple in hand. *I think I might be a bit late,* she thought to herself.

Then she noticed Mai carrying her cotton candy and standing in front of the super ball scooping game, a bit off to the side from the rest of the crowd. The sight of her standing there with lowered eyes in the dim light made Ajisai's heart skip a beat. She was rapturously breathtaking, so much that Ajisai found herself enchanted.

"Oh, welcome back, Ajisai," Mai said. When she smiled, she produced such a wave of charm that it was like magic.

"Uh, are we still waiting on Rena-chan?" Ajisai asked.

"Yes, so we appear to be. I wonder if perhaps there's a long line. The night is young, Ajisai, so let's be patient."

"Y-yeah, sure."

Ajisai stood next to Mai, still carrying the candy apple. She glanced up in Mai's direction.

"Is something wrong?" Mai asked.

"Oh, no. I was just thinking to myself that you look really pretty tonight," Ajisai said. "Oh, but what am I saying? You always look pretty."

"It's the yukata, isn't it?" said Mai. "Speaking of that, you look wonderful in yours. You're quite charming."

"Th-thank you."

Ajisai hadn't been nervous around Mai like this for quite some time. She felt the way she had when she'd first caught sight of Mai right when school began. Nowadays, she knew Mai was quite friendly and didn't find it difficult to approach her, but it was like she'd suddenly fallen under Mai's spell once more, leaving her at a loss for words.

“You seem really busy this summer,” Ajisai said.

“Yes, I have been,” said Mai. “*Maman* is in Japan right now as well, and I have an especially large workload at the moment. I can’t wait for school to start again, although I hardly think that’s a typical mindset for most students to have.”

“I get what you mean,” Ajisai said. “Anyway, thanks for taking the time to hang out with us, even though you’re so busy.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad, as it meant I had the opportunity to see you look so pretty tonight.”

“O-oh, Mai, you tease!”

Plenty of people would have taken Mai’s comment the wrong way. The fact that she could deliver such words so easily was what gave her the title of the supadari of Ashigaya High. She was a temptress.

“It’s really fun to go to a festival with both of you,” Ajisai went on.

“That it is.”

“We should come with Satsuki-chan and Kaho-chan next year too.”

“What a splendid idea,” said Mai.

Ajisai stared off into space at the strangers passing in front of her. It felt curious and wonderful, like some sort of magical witching hour that would never end.

In the midst of that magical moment, Mai said, “I heard you ran away from home. Are you feeling better now?”

“Oh, yeah, for sure. A lot went down, but I’m okay now, since Rena-chan’s been here for me the whole time.”

“I see.” Mai smiled kindly. “There’s something mysterious about her, wouldn’t you agree? She’s always there for me whenever I’m struggling. She’s lifted me out of emotional lows countless times now.”

“Yeah,” Ajisai said. “But sometimes I have to wonder why Rena-chan would go to such lengths for me.” The thought of it excited her so much that it almost made her get carried away.

Mai chuckled. “Well, because she likes you of course. No?”

“Huh? Oh, no, it can’t be. I mean. Uh.” Ajisai fiddled with the

collar of her yukata as she backpedaled in a very Renako-esque fashion. “D-do you really think that’s it? I mean, it sure looks that way to me. Right? But it makes me kind of bashful to think about it…”

She needed Renako just as Renako needed her, a special sort of relationship just like a pair of magical girl buddies. Well, when she put it like that, there was no need for any bashfulness, really. She could proudly declare that she and Renako were on such good terms like that, couldn’t she? After all, she’d never felt as close to anyone else before, not even any of her other friends. The relationship she had with Renako was unlike any other she’d ever known. It was almost like—

Just then, Mai hid her mouth with her cotton candy and said, in a clear, carrying voice:

“You know, Ajisai, I have feelings for Renako.”

For a moment, everything—even the noise of the crowd—stopped for Ajisai.

“Huh?” she said. Her eyes opened wide as Mai smiled back at her. “Wait, do you mean like…?” Ajisai almost regretted (but just almost) asking this, fearing that the vulgarity of the question would tarnish Mai’s beauty. But she had to be sure.

Mai gave her a clear smile. “Romantic feelings,” she clarified. “I’m in love with her.”

The sound of her words shone, enhancing Mai’s beauty all the more.

Ajisai forced herself to assume her usual inoffensive smile. “W-wow, I see,” she said. “I’m kinda startled to hear that out of the blue.”

She placed a hand on her chest to calm the wild beating of her heart. This wasn’t the first time Mai had ever been so abrupt; Mai was always this striking. It was just that this whole conversation felt surreal.

Feigning composure, Ajisai asked, “So, uh…are you two dating?”

“I asked her out, but I still haven’t heard a clear answer back from her,” Mai said. “Alas.”

That startled Ajisai—that Mai had fallen for Renako and asked her out first, rather. It was likewise as startling that Renako had put her on

hold.

"Wow," she said. "I wonder why she's having such a hard time making up her mind."

"I take it that she still isn't keen on dating in the first place," Mai said. "However, I think it'll only be a matter of time before she comes round."

Her face brightened as if she were a gambler anticipating the outcome of a match.

Now that the last ripples of shock were beginning to die down, Ajisai felt like she could understand at least part of where Renako was coming from. After all, getting asked out by Mai came with considerable concerns. Surely, anyone would wonder if they were fit to be Mai's partner, and they'd have to put in considerable effort for the rest of their life not to be left in the dust. In particular, Renako seemed to have a lot of hang-ups about standing on equal footing with those she associated with, so Ajisai couldn't imagine her being thrilled about giving that up here.

But since this was Renako they were talking about, then perhaps she stood a chance of making it work one day. There was something about her, more than in Kaho or Satsuki, that made Ajisai think it might be possible. She recalled how desperately Renako had battled her in ping-pong just to pay her fair share. The memory brought a smile to Ajisai's face yet, at the same time, made her heart ache.

"I see," Ajisai said. "You and Rena-chan are a thing, then, huh?"

She really hadn't noticed, not even the slightest bit. For some odd reason, her mind wasn't working properly, and it felt as heavy as a piece of clothing that'd soaked up black water. She didn't have the faintest idea how she should feel about this.

"Uh," she finally said, "could I ask why you decided to open up to only me about this? Because the others don't know, right? I guess it's because you trust me as a friend or something…right?"

Mai exhaled in a breath that almost sounded nervous.

"Renako's captivating, isn't she?" Mai asked.

"Yeah." Sure, she had her weird moments, but Ajisai thought even those could be charming.

"Therefore, I was wondering if perhaps…"

“Perhaps what?”

Mai did not beat around the bush. She laid her entire heart bare in front of Ajisai. “I was wondering,” Mai said, “if perhaps you feel the same way for her.”

The words struck Ajisai’s heart as they passed through her. “I…” she began.

She wanted to laugh it off, to stall for time and go, “Huh? Does it really look like that?” But she couldn’t make herself laugh convincingly right now.

“I…” she tried again.

What *did* she think about Renako? Truth be told, Ajisai didn’t know herself. Back when Renako had almost appeared to confess romantic feelings for her, the shock of it had set off sparks which even now still smoldered in Ajisai’s heart. It’d changed her entire worldview irreparably, the same way a cracked phone screen could never be the same again. To this day, when she saw Renako smile, her heart sometimes flip-flopped in her chest. Yet even so…

“Mai-chan, I…”

Before she could sort through her own feelings, she made up her mind. Of one thing alone, she was certain: if she were to express feelings for Renako, then that would make her Mai’s rival for Renako’s affection. They’d both be forced to compete for the singular position of Renako’s girlfriend. If she contended with Mai, what on earth would happen to the relationship the three girls had with each other? Ajisai didn’t even want to contemplate it.

There was nothing Ajisai detested more than putting her egotism first and squabbling over someone. She wanted to do whatever wouldn’t hurt anyone else. After all, there were things she valued much, much more than any vague feelings.

“I…” Ajisai said. “I don’t want to ruin our friendship.”

This was the choice that she knew she should take: to stick around as their friend. To resolve the situation without breaking anyone’s heart. To make everyone else happy.

So what if, when summer ended, Mai was the one who ended up with Renako? So long as they were happy, Ajisai would be happy too, just by virtue of being in proximity. That was how Ajisai had lived her

entire life up to this point, and she just wasn't capable of changing that this late in the game.

Mai stared at her intently before nodding in recognition of Ajisai's final decision. "I see," she said. "I understand."

Ajisai inadvertently clenched her hands into fists and bit back a sound. She burned with frustration on the inside, but she knew it was only a momentary feeling, an absurdity as foolish as running away from home. So she would be fine, she told herself.

"Yeah," she said. It'd be fantastic if Mai and Renako were into each other and started going out. She'd celebrate their happiness and, pretty soon, even this pain in her heart would fade away. Ajisai consoled her aching heart, which seemed to be on the verge of pitching a fit at any moment. The little spoiled child on Shichi-Go-San was locked away behind a picture frame, no longer a part of Ajisai. What stood here in her place was a respectable girl in her first year of high school who could definitely place others' happiness first—cheerful, optimistic, dead-set on the goal of being a grown-up oneesan. Everyone called her an angel because she was, above all else, a good kid.

Right, then. Ajisai smiled and opened her mouth. *I'm going to cheer the two of them on,* she decided. She meant to say that too, but just then —

The surrounding area lit up in a flash of light. A huge firework bloomed in the sky like an enormous flower.

"Oh," Ajisai gasped. The sound of the explosion prickled on her skin.

Mai smiled. "It's gorgeous, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

The firework burned with a fierce light that, when it was over, left no trace save for the sparks in the observers' hearts. It was exactly, Ajisai thought, like love. *Love.* The word made the ache in her chest grow. *But why?* she wondered. *It's not like that.*

Unconsciously, she raised her hand to the sky above. The fireworks exploded and rained down sparks that slipped through the cracks of her fingers.

Then, she heard a voice.

“Aha! There you are!”

Everyone was looking up at the fireworks, save for the one girl who smiled at them in radiant delight. She windmilled her arms, waving.

“Oh!” Ajisai said.

The girl’s image was captured in light every time the fireworks exploded anew. It was almost like a camera shutter, capturing moment after moment of this summer to leave them smoldering in Ajisai’s mind for the rest of her life.

Ajisai could not tear her eyes away from this girl in her yukata with one hand outstretched for all she was worth.

Ajisai clamped a hand over her mouth. She realized, just then, something that she’d chosen to look away from even when Mai had pointed it out to her, something she’d pretended not to see.

“Rena-chan, I…” Ajisai began.

She hadn’t known, not until this moment, but now she realized it had been true for a long, long time—*she was in love with Renako*.

Mai looked at Ajisai and the girl captured in the camera finder of Ajisai’s eyes. She half closed her own as if she were looking at something too dazzlingly bright. The fireworks bloomed around them, great flowers of fire, and their petals fell to earth on that summer evening.

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After the fireworks show, the three of us went back to the inn. We’d run into a couple of issues along the way, like me losing sight of them, but for the most part…

“Ahhhh!” I sighed as I stretched my arms overhead. “That was a blast!”

I felt so light once I was free from the yukata that my body almost

seemed like it belonged to someone else. It reminded me of one of those scenes in a manga where a character takes off a super heavy cast. Heck, if I wore a yukata year-round, I bet I'd get super swole.

"This was the first time I've ever seen fireworks from that close!" I went on.

"The dagashi shop, the yukata, and now the fireworks," Mai said with a giggle. "You've had quite a lot of firsts tonight, Renako."

"Y-yeah, I mean, that's true," I said. "But you didn't have to word it like that."

"That means I took your fireworks virginity."

"Stop trying to reword it!" I demanded. "And for crying out loud, get your hand off your cheek and stop staring off into space!"

This freaking girl, I'm telling you. *Mai, are you* really *trying to hide our relationship from Ajisai?* I wondered.

I glared at her, but Mai remained unruffled. "At any rate," she went on, "it's lovely to take a dip in a hot spring without anyone else around."

So saying, Mai removed all her clothes without any fanfare. Oh yeah, I should mention that we were getting into that big, communal tub. There weren't any other guests staying at the moment, so we essentially had the place to ourselves. Was this inn going to be okay? Like, financially, I mean.

At any rate, I was super-duper embarrassed to be getting in the bath with both of them. Actually, just kidding. That trembling, timid Amaori Renako? She was gone. Sure, I was self-conscious when it was just one-on-one, but this was just a big communal tub with all three of us! It was totally chill! Even I couldn't have told you why it worked out this way for me, but hey, I felt good about it. So I wasn't complaining.

"Hey, Ajisai-san," I said. "How come you haven't undressed yet?"

"Huh?" she said. "Oh, uh, I'm taking my clothes off at any… moment…now…?"

No, don't look at me like that and turn red. You'll make me *embarrassed.*

"P-please, feel free," I said.

Something about Ajisai-san was off. Last night she had been all

pushy, but now she was so shy she barely even wanted to get naked. But it made sense. I mean, I got it, from one girl to the next. Well, maybe that's not the right way of putting it, since Ajisai-san was an angel. Sorry. I nodded to myself even as I got annoyed at my own puzzling feelings. It's because Mai was here, right? It was impressive the lengths I would go to in order to not get naked in front of Mai, but I only got nervous when I thought about her as a member of the same species. I guess I considered Mai an alien from Planet Model. It was like comparing a person's grip strength to a gorilla's. You couldn't really be all that sad about losing to a gorilla, you know?

"Okay," I said, "I'm going to get in before you, then!"

"G-go ahead," she said.

I didn't want to rush her too much, so Mai and I went out to the bath. First, we stopped in at the steam-filled bathing area.

"You seem to be in quite the good mood, Renako," Mai said.

"Huh? You think?" I asked.

"I know. If this were any other day, by this point, you'd look like you were on the verge of crumbling up into a husk."

"Excuse me?! I mean, you're not wrong, but still!"

I turned the hot water on and rinsed myself down.

"I've been dreaming of this for ages," I explained. "Spending time with my friends like this, I mean. It's another dream come true for me."

"I'm glad to hear that," she said.

"Honestly, these past three months since I met you have gone by in the blink of an eye. Lots of my dreams come true when we're together."

"Really now? I must admit, I came here in order to do just that."

"Huh, really?"

That almost sounded too good to be true, but I was in such a good mood right now that I wondered if she really meant it.

"Thus," she said, "might I also make your long-held dream of becoming a beautiful bride come true?"

"I never said that was one of my dreams!"

I grabbed the shampoo and washed my hair to hide how flustered

I was. Meanwhile, Ajisai-san came in and sat a bit away from us as she began to scrub herself down.

Mai and Ajisai-san both had long hair, so I figured it was going to take them a fair bit of time. “I’m going to get in the tub now,” I told them as I finished up first.

Then I sank deep into the water and sighed in bliss. Today had been nothing but constant plodding up and down hills, so the heat felt great seeping into my muscles.

Mai grinned at me as she wrapped a towel around her head to keep her hair from getting wet. Hmmph! Look, Mai, sighing like that is just what you do in communal tubs, okay?

Ajisai-san joined us, and so we all sat together in the wide tub. One of us sighed—no idea who—and it mingled with the steam in the air. I was feeling more and more relaxed by the moment, even though the other two were right next to me.

“Thanks, you two,” I said.

“Hm?” Ajisai-san said.

“Whatever for?” Mai asked.

“Oh, uh.” I guess maybe it was weird to thank your friends for just a normal hangout, but I had really wanted to get it off my chest. “I mean, today was just so much fun from start to finish. So…”

I sunk down in the water up to my mouth and, blowing bubbles as I went, said the following dreamlike wish:

“I wish the three of us could keep hanging out like this forever.”

I couldn’t look either of them in the eye once I’d said that. Ugh. Now the mortification was starting to roll in. But the read receipts were already there, so I couldn’t delete the words that had just come out of my mouth.

Mai was the one who responded. “Yes, of course. Let’s spend the rest of our lives together and then be buried in the same grave.”

“Um, no! That’s freaky!”

Please don’t try to plan out my entire life up through to my death in a

single sentence. Wait, did that suggest that this was something she normally thought about? Okay, that was plenty freaky too!

Yet Ajisai-san, on the other hand, said, “Um, sorry, I think I’m getting a little dizzy. I’m going to step out now.”

“Oh, okay.”

Then she got out of the tub with a splash.

Wait a sec… Was she really embarrassed by what I said? Was she grossed out because we were both on way different wavelengths?

I looked at Mai to see if my suspicions were correct. She shrugged. “I think Ajisai needs some time to work through what’s troubling her,” she said.

“Wait, what?” I said. “Did something happen between you guys?”

“Yes. You can say that again.”

“What was it?”

“That’s a secret.” Mai tapped a finger to her lips and grinned. Grr!

I was curious, but since this was Ajisai-san we were talking about, I couldn’t pry.

As I began to feel concerned, Mai laid her hand on top of mine. She had her hair up in a towel right now, which meant that she was supposed to be my friend at the moment.

“Wh-what’s all that about?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“But your hand…”

“I know.”

No, I was asking you what’s with the hand, Mai.

“I love you, Renako,” she said.

“Bwah?!” I spluttered. “Wh-where did that come from?”

Please don’t catch me off guard like that, I thought. *I don’t need to get my heart rate up when I’m doing nothing but taking a bath.*

“I-I mean, I know you do…” I added.

“Yet, no matter how many times I say it, it never truly gets through, does it?” she said. “Especially considering you’re the one hearing it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re convinced that no one would ever truly care for someone like you, aren’t you?”

“I-I mean, maybe…”

After all, wasn’t that just the truth?

She sighed. “What are we going to do with you?”

Ouch, that hurt! “I-if anything,” I said, “I think it’s because you’re too aggressive. You’re always, always trying to go for my chest, and you’ll knock me over to try to get some action at a moment’s notice.” She was like a huge dog hurtling herself at her food.

“That’s because there’s nobody I want but you,” she said.

For a minute, that was so nonsensical to me that it didn’t even register who had spoken.

Then I went, “Wait, what?”

Mai smiled like nothing had happened. “Regardless of the way I look, I’m not drowning in lust for anybody and everybody. I really am fully devoted to the people I love.”

“O-okay…” I think my face must’ve been turning red from embarrassment, but it probably didn’t stand out since we were in a hot tub to begin with.

Mai’s pale skin was flushed particularly red as well, making her seem even more attractive than normal. Droplets of water rolled down the nape of her neck. I felt like I wasn’t supposed to see that, so I averted my eyes.

“…Thanks,” I said.

“Wonderful,” said Mai. “Now let’s get married, Renako. *Maman* managed to find out about that little party of mine the other day, and she’s been heaping pressure on me since. If I bring home a new fiancée, that’ll surely set her fears to rest.”

“Um, let’s not! And that’s totally what you get for pulling that stunt, you know!”

“You are so cruel to me,” Mai sighed. “I was only hoping you could make my dreams come true too.”

“I-I-I can’t plan anything that far ahead in the future! There’s no

freaking way!" I shouted.

But this was so incredibly typical of her that I couldn't help but laugh too. You know, maybe I just didn't want to give her a straight answer. Maybe all I wanted was to continue drifting along like a jellyfish in this ambiguously defined, good-vibes-only sort of relationship. But I guess that would have been way too convenient for me, huh? *But still,* I thought, *give me a bit, okay? I want to be with you like this for just a bit longer—not as your friend, not as your lover, but as your friend with Renafits.*

That night, Ajisai-san and I stayed in the same room while Mai and Hanatori-san slept in the room next door.

"Good night, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said.

"Oh, yeah. Good night."

It was after our bath. Ajisai-san wasn't nearly as chatty as she was yesterday and conked out immediately. I guess she must have been super tired.

The sandman came quickly for me too, once I closed my eyes. Ah, it felt so nice…I could feel myself becoming one with the futon.

Today was the last day of our trip, and we'd be heading home tomorrow. At first, I hadn't been sure how Ajisai-san's mini-runaway jaunt would turn out, but looking back on it, I reflected that, yeah, I'd had a good time. *Hey, Mom and Dad, guess what?* I thought. *I've made some really awesome memories this summer.*

***

I got up to use the bathroom hella early the next morning—the sun wasn't even up yet—when I heard the door to the room next door open. Still blurry-eyed in my PJs, I stealthily opened our door so as not to wake Ajisai-san and immediately bumped into Mai.

"Oh, Renako," she said. "Good morning. You're quite the early riser today."

She was fully dressed, with her long hair down and a small luggage cart rolling behind her. She looked ready to leave at a

moment's notice.

"Hi," I said. "What's with the stuff? Are you going somewhere?"

"I thought I'd make a bit of an early return to Tokyo this morning."

"What, do you have work?"

"Well, yes. But come now, don't worry about me. You two can relax until check-out time."

Huh. Mai sure had it rough. I guess she really did only get one day of vacation. I'd only just woken up, so my brain wasn't running at full capacity. But I nodded.

"Good luck out there, Mai," I said.

"Thank you. I'm heading off now."

"Uh-huh."

Mai patted me on the head. I felt kinda embarrassed, so I closed my eyes.

"It almost sounds like we're a married couple, no?" she said. "Thank you for seeing me off this morning, honey."

"What nonsense are you spouting?" I grumbled.

Her face floated closer. Then, with that same sense of tenderness, her lips brushed against mine.

"H-hey now!" I cried, pulling back out of reflex. It'd been so long since she'd done this that I'd grown complacent around her.

"Thank you for the goodbye kiss," she said. "You've made my day."

"Gah, you're the worst!"

I whacked her on the upper arm just as I saw Hanatori-san appear over Mai's shoulder. She glowered at me.

"Bwah!" I cried. She'd seen us! She'd totally seen us!

"It'd make my day twice over if you offered me a kiss too, you know," Mai said.

"P-please don't get carried away now," I said as I shoved her away.

But even that seemed to make her happy. She left with a wave.

Phew. I guess I really couldn't afford to let my guard down around her for even a second. God, the sheer mortification of someone else seeing us kissing made me feel like I was about to erupt with the hot magma of shame. Gaaaah. I mean, properly speaking, it wasn't so much *us* kissing. Yeah, a kiss happened, but it was more her kissing me. Come to think of it, at this point, a kiss from Mai was mildly irritating more than anything else, like her blowing into my ear or poking me in the ribs.

I touched my middle finger to my lips. I guess, well, this *had* been our first kiss in a long time… It had felt nice. Soft, sweet…

Oh, screw it. I was going back to bed. Yup, sleeping-in time for me!

Yet when I walked back into the room, I found Ajisai-san sitting up in her futon.

"Huh?!" I cried. My heart went into overdrive. Had she, perish the thought, seen us?

She stared at me as blank-faced as a doll and then tilted her head. "Rena-chan?" she said. "Were you talking to someone?"

Oh, good, I was safe!

"Oh, nah, it was just…it was Mai," I said. "She told me she's heading back to Tokyo before us, because she's got work this morning. Sucks to be her, right?"

"Yeah, for sure," Ajisai-san said.

"Y-yeah. Anyway, you want to sleep in a bit more?"

"Sure."

Ajisai-san lay back down once more. *Phew.* I guess she wasn't much of a morning person. I'd have to make a note of that. Wait, why was I doing that?

Anyway, I bit back a yawn as all the tension drained from me in one go. It didn't even faze me that Ajisai-san was lying next to me, defenseless and sleeping. I'd grown fully accustomed to that over the course of these past two days.

Actually, wait, Ajisai-san was lying next to me defenseless and sleeping? That made me way too nervous!

When we got up a second time, we packed our bags and checked out of the inn. (Of course, we split the cost. Thanks, Ajisai-san!) The old lady innkeeper was super kind to us even as we were leaving, and she kept imploring us to come back again if we felt so inclined. I'd never realized places like this really existed before, but it was all thanks to Ajisai-san that I'd stumbled across this gem.

Now, as we sat on a bench at the station waiting for our train, I said, "I think I've figured it out."

Ajisai-san went, "Hmm?"

It had suddenly come to me that the reason why these past couple of days had been so much fun was because I'd spent them with Ajisai-san. I mean, that was a total gimme, but it was also more complicated than that. I thought that being with her and getting to see things from her perspective overlaid an Ajisai-san filter on my world that made things appear a lot kinder. I thought that, if I lived in her world, I could be a lot more optimistic and go at life with a spring in my step.

I grinned, kind of pathetically. "Nothing. I was just thinking that I'm really glad to be here with you."

"Oh, really?" she said. "That's sweet. I had a blast with you too—oh, and Mai, of course."

I giggled.

Good, mission accomplished. Now when Ajisai-san came back to school at the end of summer break, she'd still talk to me, and she wouldn't start skipping school as one of those ganguro girls. Heh! Not too shabby of a job on my part, eh?

Big clouds puffed through the sky overhead.

Oh, come to think of it, I still had one of Satsuki-san's conversation topics left over. I hadn't needed to open it, since Mai had popped up yesterday. Well, since I was here, why not use it? The trip was just about over, so it wouldn't hurt to use it up now. That moment when I was so freaked out about finding a conversation topic now felt like ancient history. I chuckled to myself. I guess I really had grown up, huh?

Well, considering that the third one in the set was…well, that, I figured I probably shouldn't get my hopes up for this one either. Anyway, time to give it a go.

Tell Sena how thankful you are for everything she does for you, it read.

Huh, okay. I gave this one a quiet, inner nod. For all Satsuki-san's pretending to be cool and edgy, I guess this was how she'd decided to round out the set. This was less a conversation topic and more an order, but that's exactly why it let me tell Ajisai-san how I really felt about her.

“Hey, Ajisai-san,” I said.

“Hmm?”

“Well…I just wanted to say thanks for chatting with me at school all the time.”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?” she asked with a grin.

“Uh, it’s just that. Well. You know how shy I am. So having you as a friend is such a lifesaver. You’re the reason I don’t feel out of place in Mai’s friend group.”

“But weren’t you the one to go up to Mai-chan and talk with her to begin with?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” I said. “But I only managed that with a lot of effort.”

It had sort of been like an amusement park ride, something I only managed to work up the courage for once, and only with my eyes closed. I’d done it in order to make the rest of high school a cakewalk, but I’d never have made it work without Ajisai-san’s help.

She probably thought I was kidding, but I was serious. Not to be a broken record here, but it really was all thanks to her that I’d overcome my trauma of being unable to turn invitations down.

“So the whole reason I am who I am today is because of you,” I said.

Ajisai-san giggled. “You’re exaggerating.”

“No, please do let me express my gratitude. Really. Thank you so much.” I bowed.

Ajisai-san said, “You’re welcome” back in a tiny little voice.

She’d accepted my self-serving thanks. God, she really was so kind.

Just then, the PA system told us that an express train was passing by, but the train still hadn’t come yet.

“By the way,” Ajisai-san said.

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I’ve been thinking about telling you too.”

For a moment, Ajisai-san said nothing. Then: “Hey, Renako.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Renako, I really—”

And then the express train passed in front of us, drowning out the rest of her words.

I stopped my hair from flying in the wind and waited for it to pass. Then I asked her, “What were you saying just now?”

Ajisai-san looked away and shook her head. “Never mind,” she said.

“You sure? Wasn’t it important?”

“Nah.” She looked at me bashfully.

“It was stupid, that’s all.”

And she didn’t say another word about it.

Later, we both got on the train going back to Tokyo, and our two-day runaway vacation came to an end.

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story: Chapter 1
But I'm Fine With Staying Friends

AJISAI EMBARKED on her runaway adventure and set off down the road for the train station, backpack in tow.

She'd been thinking for the longest time now that she wanted a change. Her parents consistently heaped responsibilities on her, as their own work kept them too busy to fully watch over her brothers. They always apologized and looked guilty whenever they gave her some new task, so she would insist, "Don't worry. I enjoy looking after them." She was their "good kid," the one who always listened to them without going through a teenage rebellion phase.

Truth be told, she didn't hate looking after her brothers either. Of course, she was only human, so she sometimes babysat purely out of a sense of duty. But at other times, she felt that her brothers were just too cute for her to say no. Sometimes, though, when nothing seemed to go right, she would end up at her wits' end and take it out on them. Later, she would spend the whole night feeling depressed and regretting her outburst.

But it was too late for regret after this current fight of hers. She was a good girl, so she knew she should apologize immediately so everything could go back to normal. That was what happened in the ideal version of the Sena household, the one where the Senas were the portrait of a happy family. No one *made* Ajisai be a good kid; she'd chosen that role for herself. Now, all she was doing was following through with her decision for her own sake.

It made her happy to see her brothers smile. Plus, she felt like she was a big help when she was able to give her overworked parents a moment of rest. For the longest time, she'd been able to believe that these two things were enough to make her happy herself—but if she was perfectly satisfied, why was she thinking about taking the first step toward something new? This sensation had been gripping her since even before summer vacation began, and now it drove her forward. Ultimately, the situation with her brothers had been no more than the

spark that lit the powder keg. Really, this sort of vague, unplanned desire for a change was laughable.

Early in the morning when everyone was still asleep, she picked up the big backpack that she'd already packed and snuck out of the house. Her footsteps were heavy as she made her way to the train station. An inner voice of regret shrilled in place of the cicadas.

She knew perfectly well that what she was doing was stupid and the wrong thing to do. She knew she should go home, throw away the note she'd left on her desk, and pretend like none of this had ever happened. She knew that by tomorrow she'd be glad that her little runaway escapade had failed.

Once she got to the station, she decided, she'd go back. After all, she'd never been anything but a good kid, so she didn't have the guts to actually get on the train.

Thus, when she looked up and saw someone who most certainly shouldn't have been there, her heart skipped a beat. Her friend was waiting there at the train station—the very same friend who Ajisai had caused endless hassle for the other day, but waving to her and smiling like nothing was wrong.

And then the friend offered to come with her.

You're lying, Ajisai thought. *This can't possibly be happening.* She was positive Renako had no idea how happy, how relieved she made Ajisai feel. *Because I'm not being a good kid right now,* she thought. *And yet…*

And yet Renako smiled and said, "Yeah, why don't we go together?"

Ajisai should have told her no. She should have insisted that Renako didn't need to be involved in this.

And yet Renako made her so very, very happy. With Renako at her side, Ajisai felt like she could go anywhere, as if she had sprouted wings.

Renako's smile looked to Ajisai like an angel guiding her way.

Overcome with emotion, Ajisai hugged Renako. Her body felt

warm against Ajisai's and infinitely dear to her.

"Thank you, Rena-chan," Ajisai said.

"S-sure thing," said Renako.

Ajisai felt like she was about to cry, so she shut her eyes tight. It was odd, really. She was a girl, and so was Renako, after all. But all the same:

Oh, she thought. *I think this feeling I have for her might be—*

In truth, she'd known right from the start that this excitement she felt in her heart whenever she saw Renako was love.

Chapter 4:
There's No Freaking Way Summer's Over Already!

"OH GOD, oh god, oh god," Ajisai-san croaked, ashen-faced. She hugged her chest as she hyperventilated. "I'm getting super nervous."

Mayday, mayday! Inside I felt like a hamster that'd been shaken out of its nesting box, but on the outside, at least, I feigned calm with all my might and tried to get Ajisai-san to relax.

"You're going to be okay," I said. "Everything's going to be fine. C'mon, Ajisai-san, this is you we're talking about. Of course they'll let you off the hook! Besides, no matter what you've done, they'd let you off after a good 60,000 years in prison or whatever!"

When it came to causing our families issues, I was Ajisai-san's senpai by a mile. Believe me, I'd caused tons of trouble during the phase in junior high where I holed up in my room and refused to come out. Mind you, I wasn't about to mention that, because I had a feeling all it would do was make her worried about me.

She and I sat side by side on the train. Her stop was coming up any minute now, and since she'd reached out to them beforehand, her mom and little brothers were coming to pick her up.

Ajisai-san was scared to meet them face-to-face, hence the freak-out.

"I mean, I must have caused so much trouble when I left my little brothers all alone for two days," Ajisai-san said. "Just think what kind of mischief they could have gotten up to in that time. What if they've turned delinquent, dyed their hair blond, and got a ton of piercings and tattoos?"

"All that in three days?!"

I gripped her hand. Her fingertips were ice cold.

"I-I keep telling you, you're gonna be okay," I said. "I'm sure they were having the time of their lives without you. Wait, no, I didn't mean it that way! You're the main pillar supporting your household! I'm sure they've spent every moment in agony waiting for you to return. Wait,

no, uh, I don't mean that either!"

Ugh, I was depressingly awful at this cheering people up thing! No matter what I tried, I couldn't make Ajisai-san feel better.

"At the very least," I said, "even if you're worried, I'm here for you. Right?"

"Uggh, Rena-chan," she groaned.

She squeezed my hand back with a worried smile. Oh god… This weak version of her was so cute. If only she could be this weak forever! Oh, how I longed for her to rely on me, to be dependent on me for all eternity. I'd protect Ajisai-chan.

Wait, I didn't want her to be weak! I wanted her to be her usual cute, bright, and bubbly self! I shooed those nonsensical daydreams away with a flap of my hands.

And as I waged a holy magical crusade against my own wicked mind, the train pulled into the station. Oh baby, I was not mentally ready for this.

We stepped off onto the platform. Ah, Tokyo, sweet Tokyo. We'd only been away for a short time, but this felt like a long-awaited homecoming. Welcome to my homeland, free of the salt-scented ocean breeze and the hilly roads both—also, hot as hell!

"Uh, a-are you gonna be okay?" I asked. "Can you walk, Ajisai-san?"

"Yeah, uh-huh," she said. "I'll try…"

She was trying, all right. Trying her very best to walk… It was cute watching her pull off the feat of bipedalism.

We walked up the stairs towards the ticket gate, backpacks in tow. I wondered what Ajisai-san's family would say to her in light of her attempt to run away. In the best-case scenario, they'd forgive her and make up.

But what if they chastised the heck out of her? W-well, then I was prepared to steal her away again! Except this time, because I was too broke for any more vacationing, I'd take her home with me! Wait, I would? Did that mean I'd lock her up in my room like she was on house arrest? If I took her home, would she wait patiently there, playing games with me and keeping me company all day long? "Hey, Rena-chan," she'd say with a giggle. "Whatcha want to do today? I'm fine

with anything, since you're the only one who's here for me, you know." Would we develop a codependent relationship? Hoo boy, this was getting pretty steamy…

Wait, but I didn't look at Ajisai-san like that. Also, wait, wasn't I supposed to want her to patch things up with her folks? *Knock it off, me!* I told myself. *Don't wish for something bad to happen to Ajisai-san just because it behooves you! You'll go to hell for that!*

The station was empty this afternoon as we walked along, each struggling with our own internal conflicts. Then I saw two small boys and a slender, beautiful woman standing on the other side of the ticket gate. That woman was Ajisai-san's mom. She was so young! So beautiful! So sweet-looking!

Just then, Ajisai-san stepped in front of me. Oh no. She tiptoed all the way through the ticket gate, and then she ran to her family and pulled both of her brothers into her arms.

I watched the happy scene from the other side of the gate. It was too far away to hear what they were saying, but I could tell that her brothers had missed her too. They held on to their reunited oneechan tightly.

I kinda felt like…you know, I wouldn't be welcome in all that, so I hung back where I was. But yeah. When I saw them like that, I realized that I'd had nothing to worry about all along. I mean, duh. This was Ajisai-san's family, after all. Of course they were good people.

I stopped gripping my backpack straps so tightly and finally breathed a sigh of relief. This was the actual, legit end of our runaway trip. Now it was time for me to head home.

Yet no sooner had I turned to go than I heard a yell of "Rena-chan!" from beyond the ticket gate.

I turned, and there was Ajisai-san waving like mad. Sure, seeing her all weak brought along an irresistible desire to protect her, but you know what? In the end, I was happiest seeing a smile on Ajisai-san's face.

"Thank you for everything!" she called.

I felt a sudden rush of something warm in my heart. I'd actually helped Ajisai-san!

I broke out into a grin too and flashed her a peace sign in return.

“Sure thing!” I said.

And there we reached the true conclusion of our trip. I’d unlocked the good ending! The end!

***

Then, after I made my way home, I collapsed on the couch in the living room and sighed. Ah, home sweet home, the ultimate place to relax. I’d had a blast on the trip—don’t get me wrong—and I’d managed to get through it thanks to Ajisai-san being there. It’s just that it’d cost me about three whale-loads of MP in the process. I might be out of it for a good one or two weeks at this rate, I figured.

“Whoa, it’s Oneechan,” my sister said as she walked into the living room, still in her uniform after coming home from club practice. “How come you always die the second you get home after going anywhere?”

Huh? Was it evening already? Had I really been lying here for hours? Oh well. That’s just the way it works sometimes.

I was about to sink back into nonexistence again when a hand was suddenly thrust into my face. Hello?

“What?” I asked.

“Where’s my souvenir?” my sister demanded.

“I didn’t get you one,” I said. “I’m broke.”

“Noooo!” she cried.

What on earth was up with that wailing? *Don’t give me that look of disdain,* I thought at her. Was this truly my flesh-and-blood impostor sister? But my real, sister-from-another-mister sister was probably enjoying her first bit of family time in a couple of days, so I guess I had to suck it up and deal with the impostor sis.

She dumped my legs on the floor and plopped down on the couch next to me. What was this all about?

“So, did you have fun?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. Ajisai-san was there with me the whole time and all. Plus Mai showed up later too.”

“…Good for you.”

Her curt reply sounded forced to me somehow, and then it hit me. Oh. Had the impostor missed me, just like Ajisai-san's little brothers had missed her? Maybe she'd been lonely knocking around the house without a big sister around. The isolation must have been agony. Well, it only stood to reason—after all, a true extrovert can never stand to be alone. (This is coming from a biased source.) Maybe she'd realized just how much she loved me after all this time of treating me coldly, huh? Huh, huh?

I snickered as I sat up and held out my arms. *Come on. Come get a hug from Oneechan*.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll stay home with you from now on. Want to play a game together now, hm? You must have missed me, right? Right?"

"Don't be a freak," she said.

Ouch. How could she call me that so easily, the very same word that one must never, ever use on a socially awkward schmuck like me? Was she born without the ability to feel empathy? After these past few days spent with Ajisai-san's benevolence, the harshness of the world startled this poor oneechan. What a frightening world we lived in.

My sister sighed and rudely put her long, slender legs on the coffee table as she leaned back into the couch. I could see her underwear like this.

"It must be nice to be in high school and go on trips with your pals," she said.

"Huh?" I said. "Oh. So that's what you meant." She hadn't missed me, she'd just wanted to be me. I mean, my sister's envy felt pretty good in its own right, so I wasn't exactly complaining.

"You'll be starting high school in no time," I told her. "It's just around the corner. But I guess you do have to get past your entrance exams first."

"Duh, I know," she said. "Why're you acting like you have so much more life experience than me?"

"Because I do!"

This girl was always tearing me down. One of these days, she'd get what was coming to her. *Just you wait.*

"Oh, by the way, Oneechan," she said.

“What now?”

“You really scared Mom when you jetted off like that without any warning, so I think you should apologize to her.”

“But I’m scared to do that alone! Please help me, Haruna-chan!” I begged, clinging to her.

“I would have gladly helped had you bought me even one souvenir,” my sister said. “But too bad, so sad. You really messed this one up, Oneechan.”

“Please, pretty please!”

Yeah, I didn’t really think our sibling relationship was going to flip on its head any time soon.

Afterwards, I did apologize to my mom for making her worried with my selfish behavior, and she forgave me. I think it took some years off my life span in the process. My mom barely ever got mad at me no matter how much I stayed holed up in my room playing video games, but if I went and bothered someone else or got myself in trouble, there was fury to be reckoned with. My mom was terrifying when she was pissed. *Thanks, Mom, for giving me the chance to explain that this really wasn’t like what you were thinking.* Oh yeah, and thanks to my sister too.

There was also one more thing: a message from Ajisai-san thanking me again and asking if she could come over to my house some time. I didn’t think what I’d done was all that big a deal, but if I’d helped out Ajisai-san enough for her to thank me? Grand.

I gave her the okay, of course, as I wanted to see her again too. *But please wait a bit,* I thought, *for my MP to replenish!*

Once I got past the post-vacation recovery period, I completely settled back into my daily routine. I spent all day from sunup to sundown playing video games in front of the air conditioner. My skin got a little *too* acclimated to the cool temps. Oh yeah, and I did some homework here and there too, I guess. Oh, PS4-kun, my one true love. I’d never leave you again.

Phew. These days, FPS games kept getting constant updates, so you could keep enjoying the same game for all eternity. This was great, because it meant I never had to save up to go anywhere! Screw going out—there really was no place like home!

Well, clichés aside, I thought that my life would go on like this forever. I'd succeeded in turning over a new leaf in high school, and my life was now more or less railroaded. If anything, I felt like a passenger riding the train of success, living a life free of any worries like a protagonist with cheat powers in an isekai story. I figured it'd all be smooth sailing even when summer vacation ended and I had to go back to school. As a member of Mai's friend group, I thought I could hang out and have fun with my pals, even as cognizant of my social status as I was. Sure, I'd have my depression moments and my screw-ups, but I would manage to grow up—well, as much as I could; this is me we're talking about, after all—and walk into my second year of high school as a respectable figure.

I had that sort of optimistic vision squirreled away somewhere in the back of my mind, but it didn't turn out that way. The whole point of putting myself out there—to become the ideal version of myself I'd dreamed of that day doomscrolling in bed—was not to jockey my way to the top of the class but to be more proactive and sincere with the people around me. It meant I'd have to be confronted with my own uselessness many, many, many, many times. It meant I'd have to toil and labor and sweat half to death. It meant I needed to make progress no matter what, even if I was sobbing the whole time.

But I didn't get that one bit, not at the time. The clock hands had already ticked on, and things would never go back to the way they were before summer vacation.

***

It was a week after I came back from my trip when the doorbell rang. She was here! I flung myself from my room and thundered to the front door. It was the illustrious day when Ajisai-san was to come and visit my humble abode!

I got my breathing under control before I opened the front door. I'd have looked like a total creep if I showed up in front of her wheezing, after all. Well, considering I'd been cleaning my room from top to bottom since the day before, fussing with my hair to make sure

that not even a single strand was out of place, and dithering all morning long (putting my makeup on, taking it off, putting it on…) maybe the creep factor wasn't up for debate.

Anyway. I opened the door. I was almost convinced I'd be greeted with a "Why, hello, Renako," a wave, and a beaming Mai, but the smiling person on my doorstep was most definitely Ajisai-san.

"Hello," she said. She carried a pastry box with her.

"H-hi!" I squeaked. I hadn't seen her since our trip, and oh my god, she was toooo cute! Another perfect score for her! 100 points! 500 million points! She was damaging to my poor eyes, which had seen nothing but my family and those video game characters in Western games with the really striking facial features for days. Had Ajisai-san been a DLC pack, I would have bought her like a shot, no matter if she cost more than the console itself.

"Anyway," I said, "if you'd told me you were dropping by now, I could have picked you up from the station."

"It's fine," she said. "I remembered the way, more or less. Plus, it's too hot right now to make you go out if you don't need to."

Oh, she was so kind. I loved her. As my eyes turned to hearts, my mom—who just so happened to have the day off—came in from the living room. Oh no.

"Oh my," she said. "Are you that friend of Renako's?"

"Yes," Ajisai-san said. "I'm sorry about the other day." She bowed so cleanly I could practically hear the neat bend in her spine. "I'm the one who dragged Rena-chan along on my trip."

"You?" my mother said. "Huh?"

She looked Ajisai-san up and down in disbelief. I'd figured it'd be a whole ordeal to explain the running away thing to my mom, so I'd just called it going on vacation. I guess Ajisai-san understood that too and rolled with it.

But this meant we were in deep doodoo. It was one thing for *me* to be in hot water with my mom (not like I wanted that either, mind you), but I really didn't want to witness her blowing up at Ajisai-san.

As I waited with bated breath for the second coming of my mother's raging roar of "What were you thinking, jetting off on vacation like that?!" I heard my mom say, "Oh, I see. Well, I'm sure you must

have had your reasons. But next time, at least give us a heads-up, okay? You made us all very worried."

"Yes, I'm sure I caused you no end of trouble," Ajisai-san said. "It isn't much, but I brought you a fruit tart that they sell at a place in my neighborhood. I hope you won't mind."

"Oh, that's so nice of you. Thank you. I hope you'll continue to keep Renako company too."

"Yes, of course."

And just like that, the conversation wrapped up amicably. Huh? *Hey, Mom, you're showing her an awful lot more trust than you showed me.* I mean, Ajisai-san was a beauty who practically walked around with a sign on her back that said, "I'm a model student," but still.

My mom then wrapped things up by suggesting with a warm smile, "It's not safe for two girls to travel alone. If you'd really like to go on vacation with your friends, then you can invite them along on our next family trip."

Got it, Mom. I wasn't eager to take her up on that offer, given how mortifying it'd be, but at least she wasn't mad at Ajisai-san. Thank goodness for having such nice, upstanding friends.

Since I felt awkward hanging around with my mom breathing down our necks, I said to Ajisai-san, "H-hey, um, if we're gonna stand around and talk…you want to go to my room?"

"No thanks." She shook her head, still smiling. "I only came to drop by for a short visit, so I'm actually going to head out now."

"Oh… Really?"

"Yup. See you at school. Bye, Renako."

Then with another clean bow, Ajisai-san turned to go. Huh… Was that all? Ajisai-san's perfume receded, and I threw on my sandals to dash after her.

"W-wait up, Ajisai-san!" I called. "At least let me walk you to the train station."

Ajisai-san giggled. "You really didn't have to, you know."

"I know, but like… You came all this way to see us, so I was just hoping to catch up a bit," I mumbled bashfully, mortified at the

embarrassing things coming out of my mouth. Ugh, it sounded like I was practically begging Ajisai-san for attention. Yet after soaking up such a rich helping of Ajisai-san-ness during our trip together, this brief brush with her wasn't enough for me. I think I might have gotten addicted to her. See, my hands were trembling!

Ajisai-san giggled. "Sure, Rena-chan. We can chat until we reach the station. What did you want to talk about?"

Ajisai-san's kind smile turned the inside of my head into a mess of ums and uhs.

"Oh, right," I finally said. "Were you able to patch things up with your brothers?"

"Yup, we're all back to normal now. Actually, they even forgot I was mad at them in the first place, so they're totally their usual selves. They really didn't learn their lesson from this at all."

I laughed. Then we talked about basic stuff, like our summer homework and what video games we'd been playing recently. She laughed at my commentary, made responses at the appropriate times, and asked lots of follow-up questions. Any other time, I would have been descending into paranoia right about now out of fear that I was the only one enjoying this conversation. However, this vacation had made it clear to me that she enjoyed spending time with me, so I thankfully didn't get as worked up as I'd been before.

Still, this joyful time passed in the blink of an eye. It felt like only five seconds before the train station was right in front of us. If only the morning commute could feel the same!

"Oh, we're already here…" I said.

"Uh-huh," said Ajisai-san. "Thanks for walking me, Rena-chan."

"Sure thing. Um." I looked up at Ajisai-san with pleading eyes. "See you, uh…at school, I guess."

"Yup." Ajisai-san smiled at me, as kindly as if she were accepting every part of me for who I was.

Spurred on by that indulgent smile, I made the mistake of lapsing into further corniness. "H-hey, you know," I said. "You remember how you once said that you think about me when you're at home?"

"Huh?" she said.

Right there in broad daylight, I lowered my eyes and confessed, “See, I think about you sometimes too. Like I wonder what you’re up to, or if you got stuck on a homework problem like I did. Or if you’re having a fight with your brothers again, you know?”

This was way more mortifying face-to-face than over a phone! But at this point, I’d look like a complete weirdo if I chickened out now, so there was nothing for it but to gather my courage. I did my best to force those final words out.

“So, um…” I said. “If anything ever comes up again, you can always tell me. It’s not like I want to see you struggling, but… I mean, like, I don’t mind listening. If anything, I’d be happy that you were coming and talking to me, you know?”

I was hoping I could assuage even a tiny bit of Ajisai-san’s guilt after she’d come all this way to our house to bring us dessert as an apology and all. But did you think I was handling it okay? She wouldn’t take it like, “Hurry up and suffer,” right? Maybe my words weren’t enough. If I was going to rephrase it, I meant that I really cared for her as my friend, but had I made that clear enough to her?

I peeked at her reaction. She looked down slightly and then said, “Okay. Thanks, Rena-chan.”

Sure, she gave me one of her usual smiles. But—

Tears were leaking from her eyes.

“A-Ajisai-san?!” I cried.

“Huh? Wh-what’s going on?” she said. She looked shocked as she wiped her eyes. “Why am I crying? This is so weird.”

My mind went blank as I looked at her. Why was she crying? What had happened? Huh? Hello? Ajisai-san was crying!

In the midst of me completely losing my mind, I realized that there was something I could do. I rushed to yank the handkerchief out of my pocket and thrust it in Ajisai-san’s direction.

“S-sorry about this, Rena-chan,” she said. She held the handkerchief to her streaming eyes, but even then, her tears didn’t seem to stop. Why? What was going on? My heart ached.

I put my hands on her slender shoulders and led her to a spot off of the side of the road so that she wouldn't attract attention… But that was about the extent of what I could do.

I must have been making some awfully pathetic look, because Ajisai-san shook her head as she held the handkerchief to her face. "No, Rena-chan. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

What had happened? Oh, Ajisai-san… Why was she crying?

She just kept sobbing and repeating, "I'm sorry."

I couldn't say a word. I only stood there and watched her. It had felt like we were in a warm little world for no one but us, a land on top of the waves. It was supposed to be nothing but good times there, but one day we'd suddenly fallen into the water with a cold splash.

Even after her tears dried up and Ajisai-san got on the train to go home, she still kept apologizing incessantly. I asked her what was wrong, but she wouldn't answer me. Of course, I couldn't force her to tell me. In the end, all I did was smile like an idiot to let her know she didn't need to worry about it, but I didn't have a clue what she was apologizing for.

I watched Ajisai-san's train go all the way to the railway crossing, still feeling this sense of frustration. *What on earth had happened, Ajisai-san?* People don't sob like that for no reason. I mean, sure, maybe a mentally unstable samurai like yours truly did, but that's not the point. And at any rate, Ajisai-san was a big girl who could always pick herself back up after anything happened. There was no doubt in my mind, then, that whatever went down with her must have been pretty huge. I was really curious, but maybe that curiosity was inappropriate. Was it okay for me to stick my nose in her business?

I was in no mood to go right back home, so I went to a nearby park and stared at my phone to kill time. Yeah…I was worried all right. I didn't want to get up in her face and hound her for answers, but maybe Mai would be more willing to talk. She'd sounded like she'd known some things back at the hot spring bath, after all. Maybe she actually knew what was going on.

Okay. I'd try asking. And if she didn't have a clue what was up, then I'd send Ajisai-san a message to feel out the situation. Wait, feel out the situation? What's that again? How on earth does one feel out a

situation?

At any rate, I placed a (dreaded) phone call to Mai and regretted it about three seconds later. I could have just sent her a text! But hanging up immediately would look like bad news.

As I regretted making the call to make a call (har-dee-har), I prayed that, at the very least, Mai wouldn't pick up.

But she did. "Hello, is this Renako?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

"It's rare for you to pick up the phone and call me."

Ugh, she'd answered… I was nervous as all hell, but since she'd already picked up, I didn't have any other option but to talk things out with her.

I sat down on the park's swing set and said, "Um, you see…"

Mai chuckled. "Ah, I understand. You missed me and wanted to hear the sound of my voice."

"No!"

"Then, you called because you knew that I missed you and wanted to hear the sound of *your* voice? How sweet of you."

"Still no!"

Oh. Maybe I should have said yes to put Mai in a good mood. But my innate desire to refute her had won out. Urgh. If I had been talking to Ajisai-san, I would have had no issue just asking her straight out. How come I couldn't ask Mai even one piddly question?

Still, this was all for the good of the archangel that was Ajisai-san. I had no choice but to bite the bullet, so, using every bit of determination I had, I said, "A-actually… Yeah, I did want to hear your voice…"

"Or hear me voice my opinion, rather. What about?"

"Here I am making a fool of myself for your sake, and that's what you respond with?"

Mai laughed on the other end of the line. Of course she could see right through me. This freaking girl! "Anyway!" I said. "It's about Ajisai-san! I met up with her earlier for a few minutes, and she seemed kind of down still."

Mai sighed. “Hmm.”

“So…I was wondering if you knew anything, and that’s why I called.”

“I see. Well, I figured as much.”

“You knew, but you still teased me? Wow, Mai…”

“Sorry, it’s a bad habit of mine,” she said. “It’s just that there’s always such ample opportunity to tease you.”

“And now you’re just teasing me again by pretending to feel bad, aren’t you? Huh?!” I demanded.

Mai laughed again in delight and then went back to the topic at hand. “At any rate, I do indeed have an idea about what’s bothering Ajisai.”

“Of course you do! You know everything. You could even access the Akashic Records.”

“But I still won’t tell you,” she went on.

“Why not? You’re so mean!” I protested.

“No, I’m not trying to be mean, per se…”

She sounded genuinely at a loss of what to do, so I pushed my luck and went, “Okay, so what do I need to do to make you tell me?”

“Hmm? Are you making an offer?”

“Huh? Uh…what?” Oops. I’d gone too far, and now she was countering me. I could feel how in control she felt from here, which gave me pause.

Ughhhh. But I mean, it was for Ajisai-san…

Money wouldn’t move Mai to do anything, and I was sure she wouldn’t care about me offering to do her homework or clear a level in a game for her. That meant…I had to offer the one thing Mai wanted most. And the only thing that could be was…

Gulp. I swallowed the saliva in my mouth and prepared to sell my body.

“I-I could give you. Um. A l-little peck on the cheek or something,” I said.

Mai’s reaction to my dramatic decision was nothing more than, “Ah, I see.”

“Wait! Yeah, I know you think I sound like a little kid for offering that, but listen, that was just an early access teaser. The final version will be very good!”

“How good?” Mai seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself.

I sounded as whiny as a mosquito there in that park as I whimpered, “I-I’ll…k-kiss you on the mouth.”

At this point, I figured there was nothing to do but give in and suffer my humiliation. But Mai remained utterly unperturbed. “So? We kiss all the time,” she said.

“Gaaaaah!” I was so mortified I thought I was about to weep tears of blood. At this point, it was now a question of how much I’d be willing to sell my soul for Ajisai-san.

“O-okay, fine…” I said. “I’ll do something special.”

“Like marry me?”

“Are you really asking for my whole life in compensation?”

“Oh, no. I just thought that was where this was going,” she said.

Refusing to let Mai’s nonsense distract me, I whipped out the joker from my hand of cards. “Y-you remember that list of horny stuff you wrote about us a while ago?”

“Of course I do,” said Mai. “I promised that we’d do everything on that list someday, didn’t I?”

I bit back an inner scream of “*Please* forget about it!” *Don’t let her take control of the conversation,* I reminded myself. *Don’t let her take control of the conversation.*

Painfully aware of my reddening cheeks, I forced myself to sound calm and said, “W-well, um. We could do any one of those things off of…that list. I guess.”

I could hear Mai’s sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. The summer breeze scythed through the park and the resounding cicada calls.

“Any one of those things,” she repeated.

“Yes,” I said meekly.

To be honest, I didn’t really remember what was on it since I’d made it a point to try and forget. But I had a feeling there was some

pretty nasty stuff on there.

So when I made this ridiculous offer, good ol' mind-in-the-gutter Mai said, "Oh my. I must say, that proposition is enough to shatter my powers of reasoning."

"So…?" I prompted.

But just as I'd begun to ask when she was free, she shot me down. "But I still won't talk," she said.

"Why nooot?!"

Listen, she wasn't about to get a sweeter offer out of me! Weren't negotiations all about finding what your opponent was just barely willing to do? What was she playing at?

"I apologize," she said. "It's not an issue with you. I don't want to talk about it with anyone, you see."

"Oh, for the love of…" So she wasn't going to spill the beans, huh?

"Ugh, you're awful, Mai," I fake sobbed through the phone. "You've toyed with my naiveté."

"I-I'm sorry," she said.

"You were teasing me and laughing at me, even though you never planned on telling me at all! Waaah, you're the worst!"

"I'm sorry."

I figured I could carry on like this for an hour or so, wearing away Mai's conscience all the while, but I decided to stop early here. Sure, Mai may have been susceptible to my seductive wiles and art of using tears to get my way, but if I used those tricks too often, I would find it harder and harder to get Mai to lose interest in me. But I shouldn't worry about myself, I thought. Ajisai-san was the focus here!

As Mai regained her composure, she told me, "I think the problem Ajisai is facing right now is one which she should solve on her own. I can be of no help here, to say nothing of you."

"You think?"

"Yes, although I'm sure it's frustrating for both of us."

I guess Mai really did know everything, then.

As I had a flashback to Ajisai-san's tears, my voice dropped lower.

“But, I mean…are you *sure* sure there’s nothing you can do to help?”

“Yes. That goes double for you.”

It was really hard to just accept that, but I knew that if I stuck my nose into a delicate issue just to satisfy my own curiosity, I ran the risk of hurting Ajisai-san. And I didn’t want that.

Back when I was holed up in my room all the time, I never accepted any of the nice things my parents said. I just stayed shut away in my own little world. The only thing that made me come out of my isolation chamber was that I opened the door myself. It was super helpful that people in the outside world had tried to lend a hand and help me fit in, sure. But when it came down to it, it all depended on my own will. Nothing more, nothing less. That’s why I thought Mai was telling me right now that there was nothing we could do but wait.

“Gotcha,” I said reluctantly.

I couldn’t wildly bang on the door, since that’d do nothing but scare Ajisai-san off. Believe me, I knew first-hand just how much that could backfire. But all the same…

“So does that mean…” I whimpered. “Does that mean this has something to do with me?”

Mai’s response was ever so slightly delayed. “Yes,” she said. “However, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But…”

“No one did anything wrong,” Mai insisted. “It’s a situation that couldn’t be avoided… It’s something outrageous, something that no one could have willingly caused, like if girls began raining from the sky.”

If not for Mai saying that, I might have spent the rest of my life beating myself up for what I’d done to Ajisai-san.

I gave Mai the tiniest of nods. “Okay.” I sighed and then tried to sound positive. “You mean that if I worry about her, that’ll just end up adding extra stress to her plate, right? Okay, fine. I’ll try not to overthink it.”

This really didn’t sit right with me. I wanted to go pound on her door immediately, but all the same, I forced myself to listen to Mai’s advice. If I tried to straight-up face the idea that I’d made Ajisai-san cry, I was pretty sure my heart would crumble into dust. And besides… I didn’t want to cause extra trouble for Mai, not after she’d talked to me

about all this.

Mai sighed in relief. “Good,” she said. “Thank you for the favor you’re doing me.”

Bah. I’d done my absolute best to hold myself back from speaking, so how come she could read into my words so well? This freaking girl, I swear. This is why people were all over her, I guess.

“Still, can I ask you something?” I said.

“What?”

I watched the other people in the park walk past in front of me. Helplessly, I pleaded, “Is Ajisai-san going to be okay?”

“Well, we’ll just have to wait and see.” Once again, she sounded like she was trying to tell herself that too. “You know, wishing for something new is like a curse. If she wants to make it happen, she is the only one who can take that first step. You understand what I mean, don’t you?”

Oh, so it was that kind of thing? In that case, yeah. I did understand. I’d also reached out to grasp a far-off shining light.

“…Yeah,” I said, nodding silently.

I wanted to cheer Ajisai-san on from the sidelines if she was struggling with something and couldn’t work up the courage to approach it yet. I wanted to tell her that she’d be okay, even if she messed up or failed outright. Maybe I wasn’t much of a help, but I wanted to tell her that, like me, she wasn’t alone. I was here for her.

After all, she was my wonderful, precious, beloved…friend.

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story: Chapter 4
I'll Make Sure You Get How I Feel

THE SUMMER of Sena Ajisai's first year of high school passed by, day after repetitive day. She'd finished her homework early, and now she whiled away the time expanding her cooking repertoire with dishes too convoluted to produce on a daily basis and beating action games she'd set aside for being too difficult. The seconds ticked by dutifully.

She hadn't talked with Renako since the last time they'd met in person. The memory of bursting into tears in front of her still made Ajisai burn with shame. She wasn't even sure if she'd manage to keep her calm around Renako when they met in school again later, but she'd have to cross that bridge when she came to it. It certainly wasn't mortifying enough to warrant anything like skipping school. She was half-resigned to the fact that her life was already set in stone, and she'd resolved her feelings… Well, she thought she had. For the most part. At any rate, time was the best medicine, and she'd already made up her mind, hadn't she?

The days passed tranquilly in an almost curious fashion. It was as gentle as a curtain call.

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The end of summer vacation was fast approaching when, as Ajisai stared blankly out a window, a girl's voice brought her back to reality.

"Hey, Kaichou!"

"Hm?" She looked up and saw the other three girls sitting around her at a table in a diner, all friends from junior high who had ended up going to a different high school. She'd repeatedly turned down invitations to hang out due to having to babysit her little brothers, but that hadn't stopped them from asking. They were a good, patient bunch.

"How have things been for you, Kaichou?" the girl asked. "Has high school been fun?"

The girl next to her chimed in like the answer was self-evident.

“Duh, of course it has. You must’ve made tons of friends.”

Ajisai grimaced and giggled at the title—Kaichou, class president. “Come on, guys, we’re not in junior high anymore. You don’t need to keep calling me that.”

Her friends exchanged glances. “Nah, you’re still Kaichou through and through.”

“Right? Like what else would we call you? Ajisai…chan?”

“Nooo, that sounds so weird!”

The girls clapped their hands together and laughed.

“Huh, you think?” Ajisai said. She’d been president of the student council in her second and third years of junior high, and ever since then, the name had stuck. Even now, boys and girls alike from her junior high school still called her that.

The other girls began to reminisce about fond memories. “Man, you were super popular back then, huh, Kaichou?” one girl said.

“Yeah, you were the celebrity of our generation,” said another. “Like, legendary, even.”

“I hear they’re still talking about you even after we’ve graduated,” said the third girl. “They’re spreading the legacy of the famous Sena-kaichou!”

Ajisai forced herself to chuckle and sipped at her iced tea. Her friends were definitely embellishing things in this whole “Ajisai-san was incredible!” way. If you looked into any one of their claims, Ajisai knew, you’d find it was nothing but exaggeration all the way down.

“The student council was really incredible in your era,” the first girl said.

“Yeah, you guys took care of everything,” said the other. “I knew I could come talk to you whenever anything bothered me.”

“Oh yeah, like the time we were arguing over the schedule for when people could use the gym…”

They were just talking about little things that other people didn’t want to go through the hassle of dealing with themselves. It really wasn’t that big of a deal. All she had done was keep her head down and work hard every day, and, before she knew it, she’d wound up with people popping up everywhere to ask her to handle things. It wasn’t

something she'd ever expected to happen.

"Hey, are you on the student council at your new school?" one of her friends asked.

"Mm, nah," Ajisai said. She knew that Ashigaya's student council was planning on holding elections for more members after summer break, but that was the extent of her knowledge.

The girl next to her grinned for some unknown reason. "Well, you have to join, right? It'd be a total waste of your talent if you didn't end up on the student council again. You know what people say: you're just the woman for the job."

That startled Ajisai. "Huh, you think?" she said. "I don't know about that."

"What, are you in a club or something?" her friend said.

"Or is your family keeping you busy?" another asked.

"No, not really, but I just don't know…" Ajisai said.

It was just that she'd been thinking it might be nice, really, to leave the whole student council thing behind her. She had a feeling it'd end up getting in the way with all sorts of things if she carried on with it any longer.

Ajisai's evasiveness excited the other girls immensely.

"Oh, I get it!" one of them said. "You have a boyfriend!"

The other two girls erupted into squeals.

"Oh my god, Kaichou has a boyfriend?"

"No way! But you always turned everyone down when they asked you out! What kind of scandal is this?!"

"What's he like?!"

"Huh?" Ajisai blushed. "N-no, I don't have a boyfriend or anything like that."

She waved her hands in denial, but the other three girls only took it upon themselves to become even more excited. "Oh my god, I need to tell the whole junior high group chat that Kaichou got a boyfriend."

"Everyone in the whole area is going to be heartbroken. Someone's going to have to host a party for all Kaichou's poor admirers to get over their heartbreak."

“Yeah, and we’ll be first on the guest list.”

“C-come on guys, it’s not like that,” Ajisai protested. Her friends were just exaggerating again. It wasn’t like she had been asked out left and right back in junior high. Sure, maybe she’d had a few more admirers than some other girls, but that was it.

“But you do have your eye on someone, right?” one of her friends asked.

“Yeah, she must,” another said. “See, she’s blushing. You’re so cute, Kaichou!”

“Huh?” Ajisai clapped her hands to her cheeks, making the other girls smirk. “Th-that’s really not true. I mean, it’s a case where I can’t exactly tell them my feelings, you know?”

“Huh, why not?”

“It’s okay!” her friend insisted. “You’re so pretty that if you go after anyone, you’ll get them hands down!”

But that wasn’t true either, now, was it? Ajisai smiled and lowered her eyebrows. “I mean, I don’t think it’d be the most decent thing for me to do,” she said.

A metaphorical light bulb went on above the other three girls’ heads. They looked at one another and whispered, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Is it one of the teachers?”

“Is he having an affair?”

“Wait, what?” Ajisai said.

She stared at them blankly as all the other girls banded together and said, “I want to support you, Kaichou, but… This just isn’t right.”

“Exactly. This can’t end well for you.”

“You should quit while you’re ahead; he’s a loser! I know you seem like the type to date an older man, Kaichou, but still!”

“I-I keep telling you, it’s *really* not like that!” Ajisai insisted. She kept shooting her friends down, but they weren’t even listening to her at this point. They’d already made up their minds to have a serious talk with this boyfriend of hers and were discussing the matter among themselves.

Ajisai sighed and looked out the window again. Quitting while she was ahead was certainly an idea. It struck a chord with her, and she reflected on the girl she had in mind. It'd be okay, she thought. Ajisai knew perfectly well that romance wasn't really her thing, since she was always more worried about other people's needs. There'd be no unnecessary drama so long as she didn't butt into anything. Everyone could still be friends just like they'd always been. *Because,* she thought, *I've decided that this is what I should do.* She'd made up her mind on the train the day she'd come home from her vacation with Renako—she'd be a good kid.

Ajisai smiled when there was a lull in the conversation. "I'm okay, guys, really," she said. "But thank you for being concerned about me."

Finally, her friends got the hint and switched topics to something else altogether.

Eventually, it was time to go, and all the girls stood up. It had been fun catching up with old friends, and time had flown by without Ajisai having to dwell on any of her painful thoughts.

It was on the way home that everything changed.

The girls stepped out of the diner into a wave of hot air, although the humidity had recently fallen to the point where being outside was at least tolerable. Maybe autumn was just around the corner, Ajisai wondered, as she looked up at the sun still high in the late afternoon sky.

As the girls made their way to the station, one of them noticed something and said, "Hey, what's going on with that crowd over there? Is that a photo shoot?"

When they drifted closer, they saw that it did indeed appear to be a photo shoot. The street corners in this area were always being used as photo ops, so passersby could sometimes catch a glimpse of celebrities here.

The girls squealed. "No way! Is that actually her?"

"Oh my god! It's legit Oduka Mai!"

Ajisai's eyes widened. There, in the midst of all the camera crew and goggling bystanders, was her classmate. Or, no, this girl didn't resemble her classmate right now so much as the one, the only, the

glorious model Oduka Mai. Apparently on a break at the moment, she graced the crowd around her with a smile.

Behind Ajisai, her friends whispered and giggled to each other, “Oh my god, she’s so pretty in person.”

“She even has, like, a whole different vibe from us. I always knew she was special.”

“God, if only I’d been born looking like her.”

Yeah, Ajisai thought, Mai really was pretty. Not too long ago, Ajisai would have been just like her friends, whispering away that she wanted to be like Mai. But now Ajisai knew the truth: She could never be like Mai. She was only the angel blessing the world that Mai and Renako lived in.

But then some inner voice whispered, *Is that true?* She knew she should shut that emotion away. She knew—

She put her hand to her aching heart and looked up to meet Mai’s eyes. “Oh!” Ajisai exclaimed. She suddenly forgot how to breathe with those blue eyes staring back at her. For a moment, she could clearly hear Mai’s voice ringing in her mind.

“You know, Ajisai, I have feelings for Renako.”

She’d looked almost too beautiful, too dazzling, as she’d said that, and Ajisai hadn’t been able to tear her eyes away. Mai was an explosion of beauty, a firework blooming in the night sky.

The feelings Ajisai had cast aside that night at the festival rekindled in her heart. When Mai had admitted her feelings for Renako, she had looked so…so…

Before she knew it, Ajisai stepped away from her friends. This time, she was going to act without anyone’s help. She was going to do it entirely on her own.

“Mai-chan!” she called.

The crowd around her muttered as they saw her.

“Is she a model too?” someone whispered.

“She’s so cute!” squealed another.

Her friends tried to stop her as well, calling, “H-hey, Kaichou?”

But it all fell on deaf ears.

Mai’s smile brightened when she saw her classmate. “Why, hello, Ajisai. Fancy meeting you here. I’m glad you stopped to say hello to me.”

“Mai-chan, I need to tell you something,” Ajisai said. She looked like a child who had just been told off.

Mai tilted her head slightly and smiled gently. “Please go ahead,” she said.

Even though a whole crowd was watching, no one existed in their little world save for Ajisai and Mai.

“Mai-chan, I…” Ajisai-san began.

She picked up from where they had left off at the festival and addressed Mai, who had been waiting for her all this time.

“Mai-chan,” Ajisai-san declared, “I have feelings for Renako too.”

Forcing the words out took all of Ajisai’s strength and left her exhausted. For a moment, Mai lapsed into silence and looked up at the sky overhead. Ajisai and the failing afternoon light were reflected in Mai’s large, blue eyes, as if Ajisai were being drawn into them.

Mai asked, “Ajisai, do you have a few moments to spare?”

“Uh, sure. I have the time today.”

“All right.” Mai smiled and extended a bewitching invitation to Ajisai. “Then, would you be so kind as to join me for a bit?”

A rather discordant element had just been added to the otherwise gentle curtain call.

Beginning to feel rather anxious, Ajisai was regretting doing something so bold in public. As the sun slipped below the horizon, she and Mai took the train to an inner-city aquarium. She trailed along behind Mai, ticket in hand. Her footsteps reminded her of a lost child’s as she walked through the tunnel-like darkness of the aquarium.

She’d told her friends straight-out that she was going to leave

them to hang out with Mai, and her friends had been, unsurprisingly, thrilled.

“Wait, does that mean you’re friends with Oduka Mai, Kaichou?!” one girl squealed.

“Oh yeah, you do both go to Ashigaya!” gushed another.

“Hey, can we come too?”

Mai smiled back at the girls. “My apologies,” she said, “but we have something important to talk about alone, so I hope you don’t mind if I borrow her for a moment. Ajisai is a dear friend of mine, you see. I do hope you’ll continue to keep her company later.”

How could they possibly keep hounding Mai and Ajisai after a request like that?

Ajisai and Mai turned the corner, and the world opened up in front of them in the form of a lazy sea drifting across their entire field of vision. Mai walked forward a few paces and stopped before the fish tank.

“I come here on my own sometimes, you know,” she confided to Ajisai.

“Really?”

“Yes, because it’s quite dark in here. No one tries to stare at me. Something about it makes me feel alone in the truest sense, which I find relaxing.”

Ajisai came up to stand next to Mai. “Yeah…” she said. “I think I know what you mean.”

Mai smiled at her. “Say, would you like to hold hands?”

“Like we’re going on a date, huh?”

Mai giggled. “Yes, a secret date with the celebrity Oduka Mai. No one would ever guess that her beau would be a beautiful young lady from her same class.”

As nervous as Ajisai was, Mai’s playful way of wording it made her grin slightly. Mai put her hand out and took Ajisai’s small fingers in her own. Her hands felt warm.

As the two wandered through the aquarium, looking at the fish tanks hand-in-hand, Ajisai felt like she and Mai were literally and figuratively becoming closer.

“I’m totally not in your league, Mai,” Ajisai said.

“Renako tells me that constantly too.”

“To be honest, I think everyone might think that.” A grin slipped out on Ajisai’s face. “You’re so beautiful when you’re modeling, and I’m pretty sure anyone would fall in love with you if you told them you liked them.”

“If only that were true.”

The girls stopped in front of a particularly large tank and looked at their reflection in the acrylic glass. Holding hands like this, the two looked very close indeed.

“Rena-chan’s nice, isn’t she?” said Ajisai. “She’s a good kid.”

“She is.”

“I really hope you guys can be happy together.”

A huge fish leisurely swam past them.

Mai didn’t accept Ajisai’s words at face value. Instead, she said, “I’d absolutely love to make her happy, of course, but I think she’d prefer to find her happiness under her own steam.”

“Under her own steam, you say?”

“Mm-hmm. She’s incredible, really. I’ve been doing my best to make her happy too, but we’re quite evenly split in this battle.”

“Rena-chan’s fantastic,” said Ajisai. “She’s really strong.”

There were precious few people, even outside of Ashigaya High, who could rival Oduka Mai in any competition, Ajisai thought.

“Ajisai,” Mai said.

“Hm?”

“I like you, you know.”

Not surprisingly, this gave Ajisai the shock of her life.

“Uh, Mai-chan, you don’t mean *like* like, right…?” she prompted.

“As a friend, of course,” Mai amended.

“O-okay,” said Ajisai. “You gave me a heart attack… For a minute there, I thought Rena-chan and I would have to fight over you.”

Mai giggled. Perhaps she’d been fully aware of how shocking that had sounded and had deliberately tried to startle Ajisai. “At any rate, I

want to make sure you have what you want too. I care for you, after all."

"I mean, well." Ajisai's eyes swam. "I like you too, Mai."

"Oh my," Mai said. "I suppose this means our feelings are mutual?"

Ajisai giggled. "Good."

Thank goodness for Mai. Ajisai would never have been able to open up about all these feelings she kept locked away if not for her. Ajisai already felt her heartache lessening, her torment fading. If this was as bad as it got, then she felt like she could weather this forever, and that was all thanks to Mai. She wanted to tell Mai a simple thank you, and yet—

Mai beamed. "It's all right, Ajisai." Her eyes were deeper than the ocean itself as she looked at Ajisai. "I know you're being nice and holding yourself back for my sake, but you really don't need to. You should tell her how you feel."

"But if I do, then—"

"I really don't mind," said Mai. "I feel awful seeing you holding back your feelings and looking so upset. I'm sure Renako must feel the same way."

She squeezed Ajisai's hand slightly.

"But why don't you mind?" Ajisai asked.

"Because," Mai said with a grin, "I know she'll choose me in the end anyway."

Oh. Ajisai looked up at Mai. She realized, just then, that maybe she hadn't really known Mai at all up until this very moment.

Mai was so cool. Human hearts were fickle things, and there was no guarantee that one person would like another from one day to the next—and so even Mai grew anxious. That's why she flew after Renako in pursuit when she heard that Ajisai and Renako were going on vacation together. And so she lost her mind when she heard that Renako and Ajisai were sharing a room. Just like Ajisai, Mai was only a young girl in love—no more, no less. And yet, in spite of all that, she

did not so much as hesitate for a moment before making this bold declaration to quiet Ajisai's fears: *My future with Renako is assured, so you should do what makes you happy.* It was a rather indirect method to cheer anyone up, to be sure, but it was such a Mai way to encourage Ajisai. She stifled her own insecurities and fears for the sake of an upset friend with no other recourse. As Ajisai looked up at her noble friend now, she thought to herself that Mai looked truly beautiful.

"Are you saying I don't have a chance?" Ajisai teased as she broke out into a grin.

"Renako is very kind, so I suppose this might cause her to stray a bit. But please, don't worry about me. I'm sure she'll be delighted to hear you care for her this much. If anything, I feel rather bad for what I've done to you."

"You don't think she'll get how I feel, not if I put my whole heart into it?"

"Alas, I fear not. Speaking as your friend, I will say that you're wonderfully attractive. But I'm afraid you're just not the one for her."

Talking with Mai always made Ajisai's heart feel lighter. Now that she thought about it, she realized that maybe this was what Mai had been trying to say back at the festival: Mai liked Renako, so it was okay for Ajisai to admit her own feelings too. But if that was the case, then what a clumsy way to put it. It wasn't like Mai at all, not when, ordinarily, she did everything with such grace. But perhaps this awkwardness was proof that these words were from her heart.

Okay, Ajisai thought. *I can tell Renako my feelings—these unmanageable feelings that confuse me, make me a slave to my emotions, cause me to act like someone else over and over again—these feelings that I've tried and tried to conquer. These feelings that I thought I'd given up on but are still here after all this time.*

She felt like all those feelings were melting inside of her and finally becoming one single thing. "Hey, you know…" she said. "I was really scared."

"Oh?"

"So I kept telling myself that I'd be okay with keeping the status quo forever."

"I understand how you feel," Mai said.

“I never tried to go out of my comfort zone, because this is the person I want to be. This is the person I’m *supposed* to be.”

But it was impossible for her to confine her growing feelings, or else one day, the aquarium tank of her heart would shatter.

Mai let go of Ajisai’s hand and hugged her around the shoulders. “To live is to change,” she said. “We change infinitely based upon our environments and our encounters. After a long enough time, a fish swimming in the ocean can become anything, even a bird flying through the sky. If we give up on change, then we lose what makes us human.”

“Yeah, but still…” Ajisai clutched her chest like her heart ached. “But I’ve always wanted to be Rena-chan’s angel, no?”

“What are you talking about, Ajisai?” Mai tilted her head and leaned up against Ajisai.

Ajisai could feel her body heat as Mai whispered to her, “*On n’a qu’une vie*. We have but one life in which to live. To be a girl is to love, no?”

“And Ajisai,” Mai breathed, “you’ve never been an angel. You’ve simply been a very pretty girl, all along.”

Ajisai’s vision swam with tears. “Mai, it…kind of sounds like you’re telling me you like me.”

“You’re right. It looks like I’m one step ahead of you in working up my courage, no?” Mai grinned as she spoke.

The fact that Mai had been nervous over this struck Ajisai as slightly funny. “Thanks, Mai-chan. Really.”

“Of course. Likewise…thank you for hearing me out.”

Their shadows became as one in front of the aquarium tank.

“If lovers support one another through the bad times, the lonely times,” Mai said, “then I also think there are partners who believe in each other’s ability to get back on their feet and walk with them through any difficulty. And these latter, to me, are what we call friends.”

She blushed slightly. “It’s hardly likely, but I suppose there is a slight chance my encouragement of you could backfire on me. But if my selfishness were to make my friends regret their decisions, then I wouldn’t be worthy of the name Oduka Mai.”

Ajisai encircled her arms around Mai’s back, feeling ever so slightly proud that Mai thought of her this way.

“You’re really admirable, Mai,” she said.

“You’ll make me blush,” said Mai.

“Thank you… Thank you very much.”

She hugged Mai one more time. *It’ll be all right,* Ajisai told herself. No matter how this turned out, she and Mai would still be friends. No matter how much they changed, this moment, in which they’d both fallen in love with the same girl and told each other their feelings, would live on forever. Therefore, everything would be all right now.

Ajisai disentangled herself from Mai and wiped her tears away with a grin. “Can you watch me do this?”

“Sure, if you would like me to,” Mai said.

Ajisai took a deep breath and then… She placed a phone call. The person on the other end of the line picked up.

“Uh… Hey, Rena-chan?” Ajisai said. “Is now a good time to talk? Um… Oh gosh, uh…”

She decided, then, to be selfish.

“Do you think we could meet up?” she asked. “Yeah, uh-huh… No, just for a little bit is fine… Okay, thanks.”

After Renako suggested the park near her house, Ajisai hung up the phone. She felt so dizzy she was almost on the verge of collapse, so Mai supported her small frame.

Mai gave Ajisai a gentle smile. “Good job, Ajisai.”

“Yeah, thanks… I was so nervous.”

The two grinned at each other as amicably as a school of fish in an aquarium tank.

Then Ajisai set off, as if throwing off all gravity entirely. Her first step was like walking on air.

Epilogue

AFTER THROWING on clothes and scrambling out the door,

I got to the park where we were supposed to meet and found Mai waiting for me alongside Ajisai-san. What the heck was Mai doing here? It was already getting dark out, and had I agreed to meet anyone but Ajisai-san, I totally would have thought I was about to get jumped. Mai wasn't mad at me or something, right?

Gingerly, I asked, "Uh… Is this some kind of meetup?"

The two exchanged glances. What the? This was some freaky shit.

Ajisai-san took a step forward. In the slight chill of that summer night, she said, "Um, you know what?"

"No, what?"

She put a hand on her chest and took a deep breath. "There's something I need to tell you, Rena-chan," she said.

"Y-yeah, hit me." Now I was starting to get kind of nervous.

"I've always been really bad about taking things that belong to somebody else," she said.

"O-okay…?"

"Yeah, and… You know, whenever anyone was playing on the swings or anything, I'd never say 'My turn!' even when it was time to switch. I'd just think that the person who was using it was having fun, so I'd be fine sitting out. I couldn't bring myself to push them away just so that I could have fun."

I took a brief glance at Mai. Where on earth was this story going? But Mai just shrugged slightly, in an "I know, but hear her out" sort of gesture.

In fits and starts, Ajisai-san said, "And once I started babysitting my little brothers, that feeling only got stronger. I thought I was happy seeing other people being happy."

Yeah, she'd mentioned that once before.

"And whenever anyone in class invites me to hang out with them,

they're doing so because they want to spend time with me, right? So my thought's been that as long as they're having fun with me, then I'm fine with accepting. For ages now, I've thought I've been a good person who was being considerate towards other people."

Now Ajisai-san giggled. "But a real good person wouldn't call themselves that. I'm just stupid. All I've been doing is holding myself back constantly so that I wouldn't say anything selfish."

Ajisai-san fixed her gaze on me. "But then you taught me something, Rena-chan."

I didn't understand what sort of emotions were at play here, but it was coming through loud and clear that Ajisai-san had a tremendous emotional investment in this.

"I-I did?" I said.

"Yeah," she said. "You're always so brilliant, and you light the way forward for me. Rena-chan, you gave me the strength to make progress."

Ajisai-san took another deep breath. "So," she said. And…

Right there, under the night sky, she said the most beautiful words in the entire world.

"Rena-chan, I really like you. Would you go out with me?"

For a moment, I couldn't say anything at all. All I did was stare at Ajisai-san's crimson face. My heart had been thudding away for some time now and I… I mean. I couldn't think anymore.

So I nodded and replied, "S-sure…"

"…Excuse me?" Mai said. Her question was so loud it could be heard throughout the entire park.

The Sena Ajisaide of the Story: Epilogue

AJISAI SAT DOWN in the entranceway and put on her brand-new loafers. It'd been so long since she'd worn her uniform, and it felt nice to once again have this proof that she was a high schooler, like it was her guide down the path of adulthood. The thought cheered her on. Today was the start of the second trimester, and while she hated getting up in the mornings, the prospect of seeing her friends again made her excited. Life was a constant cycle of misfortune following fortune. She feared the day when all the delicious treats would run out and when she'd lose the dear friends she'd made. But that fear didn't mean she had to hide away inside herself. She had to open the door and take a step forward.

Just as she was about to leave, her mother called her back and gave her an envelope addressed to her. Curious, Ajisai flipped it over to read the back. The sender was the Suzuki Photo Studio.

"Oh!" Ajisai cried. She tore open the envelope in excitement and found the photograph of her and Mai. It almost looked like a snapshot taken with a pop star, what with Ajisai standing next to a star model like that. "Maybe I should bring this to school with me and get Mai to autograph it."

She grinned broadly, and then she realized that there was a second photograph as well. This one was a shot of all three of them, not a portrait in the studio proper but a snapshot of the girls looking around at the other photographs. Renako stood in the middle of Mai and Ajisai, giving the camera a little peace sign and a grin.

Ajisai's smile broadened. "This is a really nice photo," she said. She'd show it to the others for sure.

She put it in her backpack and set out once more, calling, "I'm heading out now!"

It was a beautiful day outside, and her steps were light. A gentle breeze blew through, bringing with it the feeling of autumn.

As Ajisai waited for her train, someone behind her called, “Hey, Kaichou!”

Ajisai turned, and there stood one of the girls from that hangout over summer vacation, now dressed in her school uniform too.

“Oh, hey, Yuri,” Ajisai said.

“Does your school start today too?” Yuri asked.

“Yup. I’m so sleepy, ’cause I haven’t gotten up this early in aaages.”

“Same.”

Both girls shared a laugh.

However, as Yuri stepped up next to Ajisai, she lowered her eyes. “Hey, Kaichou, sorry about that thing the other day. I feel like we kept teasing you.”

“Huh? Oh, no, don’t worry about it.”

“Nah, we kept on badgering you about the people you like and stuff. That was kind of mean of us, I think. We all felt bad about it on the inside.”

“Really? That’s sweet of you guys.”

“I mean, you kept on smiling no matter what we said, so we got really carried away. I’m sorry. Oh! Hey, do you want to take my bento for lunch today?”

“I can’t possibly eat two lunches,” Ajisai told her, shaking her head no with a grin.

The train would be here at any minute, but she said, “Hey, Yuri-chan.”

“Hmm?”

With the same sense of mild happiness as if she were remarking on the color of a flower passed by on their route to school, Ajisai said, “You know, I asked someone out the other day.”

The other girl shrieked so shrilly everyone on the platform could hear it. “Wait, you did, Kaichou?! Wh-who’d you ask out? I’m trying to think of who would be a good match for you… Like, Oduka Mai, maybe?!”

Ajisai giggled. “No, not her.” She tapped a finger to her lips and

whispered, rolling the words in her mouth like a piece of candy on her tongue, “You see, I asked out the one who’s pulled me forward and protected me—my own adorable angel.”

Your happiness is my happiness, sure, but I want to go get my own happiness too, Ajisai thought. Now that she put that into words, she realized that this was all she wanted, but she could never have come to that conclusion on her own. It was Renako who had made her see it. It was all thanks to the girl who always charged forward with single-minded intent, chasing down her own happiness.

Summer vacation was over, but Ajisai’s love story was just beginning. Once again, the clock hands ticked relentlessly on. Ajisai hoped that the train tracks of her life would continue on and on towards their final destination—happiness.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

Thank you very much for picking up Volume 3 of *There's No Freaking Way I'll be Your Lover! Unless…*

Now that Renako has overcome the challenge that was June in her new extroverted life, summer vacation is here. This is a story of how our gamer protagonist falls into a new set of hijinks.

Also, I'd like to thank you for waiting, as I've now delivered on the promise that I made in the afterword of Volume 2. I may not have made much progress in Ring Fit Adventure, but if I had, Volume 3 might never have seen the light of day. So, that's a good thing, right? (Look at me getting defensive here.)

Ajisai-san plays the leading role in this volume after Renako's been toying with her feelings since Volume 1. This is the story of her one unforgettable summer. You know, that sounds pretty emotionally charged when I write it like that.

From time immemorial, girls and summer, girls and vacations, girls and fireworks, and all that jazz have been treated as symbols of fervent emotion. Therefore, romcoms with girls falling in love with each other are bound to be twice as emotional.

By the way, as I wrote this volume, I kept picturing Ajisai-san wearing a straw hat and a white dress…but now that I'm done, I see that she hasn't actually shown up like that anywhere in the book. Kind of freaky, don't you think? They do say that summer is the season for horror, after all…

I know that this book is a bit different from the rest of the series so far, but I hope you enjoy Volume 3 all the same.

The stage is set for Volume 4 as Ajisai-san begins to take her first steps into uncharted territory. I think that the many people who've been coming up to me all over the place and saying, "Hey, did you know? There's this really funny romcom out there called *There's No Freaking*

Way I'll Be Your Lover!" is a good sign that Volume 4 will come out. I'm very happy; aren't you?

In Volume 4, it will finally be time for the mysterious beauty Koyanagi Kaho to take the spotlight. I've been stockpiling all of Kaho-chan's power so she can go off with a bang. I'm going to do my best so that maybe, say, 20 percent of the book's readers will go, "I think Kaho-chan's my favorite character now!"

Also, Renako will be going through trials and tribulations again. Good luck, Renako. Good luck…

Now, let's move along to the acknowledgments.

Once again, a big thank you to Eku Takeshima-san for the illustrations. She lends me the energy that makes me want to write everyone to be even cuter. Also, a heartfelt thank you to my editor K-hara-san and everyone involved in the making of this book. We're already at Volume 3 of this Reiwa era girls' romcom! Let's keep making more girl/girl stories.

Above all else, an enormous thank-you to the people who purchased this book and the bookstore staff who worked hard to sell it. You, of course, are the ones to thank for me being able to fulfill my promise from the Volume 2 afterword.

I still have plenty of things I'd like to write for *TNFWIBYLU*. If I'm allowed to be a bit selfish for a moment here, à la a certain girl named after a flower, then I hope I can continue even past Volume 4. Please continue to support me in this venture.

Okay, chaotic running-out-of-space announcements time! *TNFWIBYLU* manga Volume 2 drawn by Musshu-sensei comes out on April 19th in Japan! Keep an eye out for my other series *AriOto* too!

Hope to see you around somewhere! Teren Mikami, signing off!

Creator Bios

AUTHOR BIO

Mikami Teren

BORN ON DECEMBER 16 IN SAITAMA

I labor every day to expand the repertoire of works in the yuri genre. But I'm constantly going, "Yeah, this counts as yuri, right?" so saying I have a loose definition of yuri is putting it lightly.

My favorite healthcare products are hot eye masks and the herbal drink kakkontou.

It's all going to be okay, because this is a Mikami Teren yuri book!

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Takeshima Eku

BORN ON APRIL 23 IN OKAYAMA

I just do my little drawings as an illustrator and manga artist specializing in yuri.

I'm sending lots of cute Ajisai-sans your way!

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